



Miraijin A
Art by jimmy

2

As a Reincarnated
ARISTOCRAT,
I'll Use My Appraisal Skill to
Rise in the World





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**“Of course, if you
find an exceptional
tactician to fill
the role, that could
change everything.”**

**“Talented recruits
don’t grow on trees,
you know.”**

Ars

The lord of House Louvent.
Possesses the skill Appraisal, which
allows him to see the talents and
abilities of anyone he looks at.

Rietz

A boy whose incredible latent
talents were unveiled by Ars.
Worries about Ars constantly.



“You’re
incredible,
Lady Charlotte!”

*Licia
gushed,
her eyes
sparkling
with ad-
miration.*

“Taking out a
few **bandits** is a
given for someone
as skilled as I am.”

Licia

Ars’s fiancée. Quite taken
with Ars’s talent and his
power’s potential.

Charlotte

A talented mage who Ars
recruited into House Louvent’s
service. Also something of an
unpredictable oddball.

As a Reincarnated **Aristocrat,**

I'll Use My Appraisal Skill
to Rise in the World

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By Miraijin A

Illustrations by jimmy

Translated by Tristan K. Hill



KODANSHA

As a Reincarnated Aristocrat, I'll Use My Appraisal Skill to Rise in the World 2

A VERTICAL Book

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Prologue

The city of Arcantez wasn't always a provincial capital. It existed before the Summerforth Empire's founding, over a thousand years ago, when Missian was still an independent kingdom. Even then, it served as the realm's ever-flourishing seat of power. In the modern day, Arcantez boasted a population of over five hundred thousand people. Few cities in Summerforth could claim to rival it in terms of sheer scale.

Castle Arcantez was situated at the very center of the city, and it towered over the buildings around it. It was the largest castle in all of Missian. The jet-black stone it was built from had earned it the popular nickname the Onyx Citadel. The stone itself was called royal onyx, and it was known for being sturdy and resistant to weathering. Needless to say, stone with those qualities was highly sought after, and royal onyx fetched quite a high price on the market. The castle was built a hundred years after the Kingdom of Missian's founding, and it told a tale of the realm's past prosperity.

Deep within the Onyx Citadel was a room known as the Chamber of Debate. A round table was set up in the very center of that room. On this day in particular, a cluster of nobles was gathered up around it, engaged in a war council.

"So our plan to entice Perreina to our side has failed," said a man with long, black hair that reached his shoulders. His name was Vasmarque Salemakhia. He was the second son of the recently deceased Duke of Missian. At the moment, he was engaged in a power struggle with his elder brother, Couran, with the title of duke on the line.

"So it seems. I have to wonder how they pulled it off. It wasn't a bad plan in

my book. Then again, it's also no skin off our backs—even if Perreina sides with the enemy, we still hold the advantage,” said a man who sat to the right of Vasmarque. His name was Thomas Grunzeon, and he was acknowledged as Vasmarque's right-hand man. In contrast to his lord, Thomas's head was close-shaved, though an ample beard covered the lower half of his stern face. He was also exceptionally tall and sported a muscular build. One might have thought him to be a downright musclehead, at a glance, but in truth, his mind was just as honed as his body.

“Nonetheless, Perreina's betrayal is a hefty blow indeed,” mumbled an older man who sat to Vasmarque's left. This tiny, white-haired, aged man's name was Remus Ives. He had served the Duchy of Missian for decades as one of its wisest and most eminent tacticians. He was also the Count of Lomak, a county that was adjacent to Arcantez. These three outstanding leaders served as the core of the war council, and they drove the conversation forward.

“The enemy's forces number a hundred and fifty thousand,” said Vasmarque. “Considering the fact that they'll have to leave troops behind to guard their borders, we can assume their effective fighting force will be around ten thousand less than that.”

“And we've a hundred and eighty thousand that stand ready to mobilize,” added Remus. “Strength of numbers is ours, but alas, their troops have the edge in both training and skill. The west has always held the upper hand in military might, and word is that Lord Couran has hired the Maitraw Company to fight under his banner. All things considered, we ought to assume our sides stand on even footing.”

“Fair 'nuff, but it's not like their commanders are anything to write home about, Couran aside,” Thomas noted.

“In terms of personnel, we have the overwhelming upper hand, yes,” agreed Vasmarque with a nod. “The odds of our loss are slim.”

Vasmarque had taken a long, objective look at the war he was about to wage, and had concluded that it was in his favor. He did not, however, believe that his victory was one hundred percent secured. He was not a man prone to imprudence, and he would not declare preemptive victory until he knew for a fact that he had won.

“What has become of your sister, Thomas?” asked Vasmarque.

“Huh? Her?” said Thomas, cocking his head. “Hell if I know. Out drinking herself under a table somewhere, most likely.”

“And where would she be doing that?” Vasmarque pressed. “I have a mind to let bygones be bygones and bring her back into my service.”

No sooner had the words left his mouth than the room descended into an uproar.

“Y-You can’t be serious, Milord! You’d let *her* be your retainer again?” asked Thomas, aghast.

“You can’t deny that she has the talent,” said Vasmarque. “And if recruiting her fails, then at the very least we’ll want to bring her back to the castle and lock her up until this is all over. Imagine the headache if she decided to side with Couran.”

“That’s...well, that’s fair enough,” said Thomas. “However, I don’t have the faintest clue where she could be right now.”

“None at all? Not even a guess?”

“None,” Thomas sighed.

“A woman like her is hard to miss. You’ve heard no rumors? Nothing? And not just Thomas—does anyone here have any information at all?” Vasmarque added, turning to address the rest of the room. Unfortunately, though, he was met with nothing but frowns and the shaking of heads. “Hmph. I see, then.”

“Trust me, Milord, she’s either dead in a ditch or off in some other duchy,” said Thomas. “And even if she were in Missian, no lord on Couran’s side would ever stoop to employing her. Skilled or not, the woman’s nothing more than an alcoholic these days.”

“I suppose you have a point,” muttered Vasmarque. He still felt uneasy, but he decided to cast that woman from his mind for the moment, for better or worse.



Chapter 1: **A New Recruit**

After my first life in Japan came to an abrupt end, I was reborn in another world and granted the name Ars Louvent. The Louvents were a noble household who ruled over a barony called Lamberg, and I was the Baron's first son and heir. I was also born with a certain skill: Appraisal, the ability to perceive the stats and abilities of the people around me.

Unfortunately, the nation I was born into—the Summerforth Empire—was going through some rather troubled times. Civil wars were breaking out left and right. I swiftly determined that my sole chance at surviving to see adulthood would be to use my skill to recruit as many talented retainers as possible and bolster our domain's strength. So far, that plan had borne fruit. I'd managed to track down and recruit Rietz, Charlotte, and Rosell, three exceptional individuals who had all agreed to serve me.

Things had been relatively smooth sailing so far. Thanks to my retainers' talents, I'd managed to rack up several achievements to my name. I'd even been given the chance of a lifetime to increase the size of my territory. In that moment, I made an oath to myself not to let that opportunity slip by me. I *would* become the Count of Canarre, whatever it took.

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After my talk with Couran concluded, we made our way back to the party. We hadn't been away long, as best as I could tell. My internal clock told me it hadn't been much more than twenty minutes. The party continued as the night

wore on, and eventually, the new year arrived. By that time, a fair number of nobles seemed to have drunk themselves into a stupor or otherwise departed from the hall, so the place was less packed than it had been in the beginning. Thirty minutes or so after we rang in the new year, the party came to a close and I retired to a room that had been prepared for me.

The mood the next morning couldn't have been further separated from the celebratory tone of the night before. In anticipation of the upcoming war, Couran decided to take the opportunity to give the nobles who had sided with him a summary of his plans. In short, he informed us that he'd be calling a series of war councils to start, after which his invasion of his brother's territory would begin in earnest. This wasn't a matter of the far-flung future, either—he ordered us to be prepared to rally our troops at a moment's notice.

With that, our gathering came to a close. I met up with Rietz and the rest of my entourage, and together we set off for Lamberg once more.

“War councils, you say...?” muttered Rietz. We'd arrived back at my estate, and I'd just finished explaining to him that I might need him and Rosell to accompany me to Couran's meetings. “That's quite the hefty responsibility to bear... I've grown used to providing Lord Raven my opinions over the course of the battles we fought together, but Rosell is inexperienced in the field.”

“Right. That's what I was worried about, too,” I replied.

“Participating in meetings of this nature will be a valuable experience for him, but I'm afraid I can't say that he'll have anything to contribute. For now, at least,” Rietz continued.

It seemed he and I were on the same page. Rosell's Intelligence was high, to

be sure, so I didn't want to write him off, but it was very hard to imagine he could come up with a scheme that would get the better of the enemy's tacticians.

"I could say the same about myself, to be honest," Rietz added. "The enemy's tacticians are far more experienced than I am in the field of war, and there are several of them and only one of me. To be frank, I have very little confidence in my ability to overcome their schemes."

Yeah, that's fair enough.

I was starting to question my decision to take Couran up on his proposal.

"Of course, if you find an exceptional tactician to fill the role, that could change everything," noted Rietz.

"Talented recruits don't grow on trees, you know," I sighed. I had no choice but to hope that Rietz and Rosell would somehow manage to pull something out of their hats. Especially Rosell—if he could make it past the plateau his skills had hit by gaining some real-world experience, I just knew he could grow far beyond his current capabilities. His maximum Intelligence score was 109! I couldn't imagine more than a few people in the world having greater potential than that.

At that moment, one of our servants burst into the room.

"Urgent news, Lord Ars!"

"What is it?"

"We've received word that a member of the Shadows has arrived at the Tremps!"

"It's been a month already...? Understood—we'll leave at once!" I replied. I'd stationed one of my retainers in Canarre, just to make sure that the transfer of

information between us and the Shadows went well. I assumed he must have sent the message that my contact had arrived.

“Lord Ars,” said Rietz. “Might I suggest that you ask the Shadows to help look for talented recruits?”

“You think I should ask the Shadows to help with my headhunting? Is that even something they can do?” I asked, cocking my head.

“I don’t imagine it would be impossible,” said Rietz. “They may not be capable of analyzing people with your precision and accuracy, but considering their leader Pham’s capabilities, I’m certain they can judge talent.”

“Yeah, that makes sense,” I agreed with a nod. “I can just appraise anyone they bring to me before I decide whether to hire them.”

“I believe that would be for the best,” said Rietz.

I wasn’t convinced that finding helpful recruits would be that easy, but I also couldn’t see any particular reason not to give it a try. Failing would be better than not trying at all. Plus, I knew that Arcantez had a massive population. The odds seemed high that there’d be at least a few people with latent talent that I could make use of.

With a plan in place and a new request for the Shadows, we prepared to set out for Canarre and the Tremps.

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We arrived at the Tremps to find our contact Ben already there, waiting for us. I didn’t recognize him at first glance, but I’d taken care to remember his

rather ostentatious real name. So it only took a single appraisal to verify his identity.

“The boss’s report’s in this letter. It’s all yours,” said Ben, handing the letter in question over to me.

I opened it up and gave it a read. The first item the report addressed: the Shadows’ attempt to infiltrate Castle Arcantez. They’d made an effort, it seemed, but the citadel’s security turned out to be airtight, and they’d determined that sneaking in would be impossible. That meant they’d have to resort to more roundabout tactics. The report said that they were working on making connections with a senior retainer employed in the castle, who they would use to sneak an agent in under the guise of the retainer’s assistant.

At the moment, they were working on gathering information to decide who they should start ingratiating themselves with. As a result, they didn’t have anything in the way of useful info to report on at the current time. That concluded the report. Once I’d finished reading it, I handed over their payment for the next month to Ben.

“This looks to be in order,” said Ben as he counted the coins. “I think we’ll have something more helpful on the next report, so look forward to it.”

“I will. Thanks,” I replied.

“Don’t mention it. See you next month,” said Ben, standing up to leave.

“Just a minute!” I interjected before he left the table. I still hadn’t asked him about my other request. “There’s actually something else I wanted to ask. Do you have a minute?”

“I can squeeze it in. What’s the job?”

I explained that I was looking for recruits, and was hoping that they’d take

note of anyone promising they came across and send them House Louvent's way.

"Yeah, that should be easy enough," said Ben once I finished. "But what if we mess up and send you someone worthless? Will you dock our pay or something?"

"No, nothing of the sort," I replied. "The opposite, in fact. If you *do* find someone useful, I'll give you a bonus of twenty gold coins."

"Twenty gold, eh? Got it. I can't promise anything until I get in touch with the boss, but I have a funny feeling he'll be up for the job."

"Great, thanks."

That concluded our business in Canarre, so we set off for my estate once again.

○

Some time later, in the capital city of Arcantez, Ben made contact with Pham in a shadowy back alley to deliver his report.

"A headhunting job, eh?" Pham muttered.

"What do you think?" asked Ben.

"I'm pretty good at picking out folks who can handle the sort of jobs we deal in," said Pham. "But spy work's a far cry from the soldiers that he'll be wanting. Not so sure I can tell who's suited for that business."

"Do we turn the offer down, then?"

“Well, he said there’s no penalty for sending him worthless chumps, right?” asked Pham with a sly grin. “And we get a hefty bonus if we happen to hit paydirt. Sounds like a solid deal, if you ask me. Not like we have anything to lose by taking a shot at it, so we might as well send a few people his way.”

“Understood. Guess it’s headhunting season for us, then.”

“Mhm. Tell the others for me, will you?”

“On it.”

Ben left to inform the rest of the Shadows of their new mission. Pham, meanwhile, returned to his own place of work.

Even after relocating to Arcantez, Pham had continued working at a local bar to aid in his intelligence-gathering operation. At the moment, he was employed at a pub known as Kentlan’s. He’d also kept up old habits in the sense that, just like when he worked at the Tremps, Pham did so in the guise of a cute, youthful waitress. Nothing loosened up a person’s lips like a drink or two, and Pham knew it. Even better, most people were prone to underestimating a young girl’s ability to understand the things they talked about, prompting them to spill the proverbial beans more often.

Kentlan’s wasn’t frequented by any of the retainers employed in Castle Arcantez. It was, however, the preferred watering hole for some of the castle’s guards and servants, and they were less than prudent when it came to telling tales of the retainers who worked above them. Pham learned what sort of people they were, what their duties were, where they went in their free time—even their likes and dislikes. The idea was that collecting enough of that sort of info would allow Pham to curry favor with an easily influenceable retainer and secure himself a job as a servant within the castle itself through them.

An operation like that, of course, was a lot easier to plan than it was to execute. In this day and age, the castle's servants weren't recruited from the general populace, but rather born into the role. A multitude of families had served within the castle for generations, passing their positions and trades down to their descendants. It wasn't impossible to earn a place within the castle if someone in a position of power took a liking to you, but it wasn't easy either.

Fortunately for the Shadows' paychecks, that was only Pham's current objective. The rest of their agents were busy with their own distinct operations to gather information, each of them conducted in a manner that fit their strengths. Pham expected that every member of his band other than him would have relevant and useful information to contribute this month.

"I'm back, everyone!" Pham announced as he stepped into Kentlan's. His tone of voice, expression, and mannerisms were so different from how they'd been during his discussion with Ben that he was unrecognizable.

"Rin!" said Lartz, the proprietor of Kentlan's. "What'd that guy want with you?"

Rin was the name that Pham had chosen to go by while he operated in Arcantez. He explained to Lartz that Ben was his older brother, and made up a tale about how Ben was such a doting sibling that he felt uneasy if he didn't come to see his sister in person every once in a while. Lartz swallowed the story without a second thought.

It was right around noon, and the bar was almost devoid of customers. Unlike the Tremps, Kentlan's clientele dried up during the daytime. At this time of day, Pham didn't have much to do other than clean the place...or at least, that was the usual case.

“You open?” a somewhat husky, but distinctly feminine, voice rang out as the door swung open. It seemed Kentlan’s had a midday customer for once.

“Yes, welcome...ugh! *You?!!*” Lartz choked as he turned to look at the new arrival. She was an exceptionally tall woman, enough so that her height would be notable even if she’d been a man. That wasn’t to say she was mannish in appearance, though—in fact, she was beautiful beyond words. The sparkle of insight in her eyes left an impression: this woman was a force to be reckoned with. Her worn and ragged outfit, on the other hand, left the impression that she was a penniless vagabond, though her golden necklace raised all sorts of questions. Even at a glance, it was clear she was no ordinary woman.

“Mireille! Since when were you back in town?” asked Lartz.

“Hey there, Lartz,” said Mireille. “It’s been, what, two years now? Man, you’ve still got a face like a wrung-out towel—who pissed on your chips this morning?”

“If you’re here to insult me, then you can turn right around and get the hell outta my bar,” snapped Lartz.

“I’m *kidding*,” laughed Mireille. “You might not be a looker, but I’ll never get tired of that mug of yours. I swear I saw a fish that looked just like you the other day.”

“One more word and I’ll run your ass outta here,” growled Lartz.

“You really can’t take a joke, huh? Anyway, I’ll have the usual.”

“What ‘usual’?”

“What, you forgot already? Bowl of samella, loaf of bread, and booze.”

Samella was a tomato-based vegetable and chicken soup. The dish was characterized by how long it had to be simmered before it was complete.

“You expect me to remember your order when you haven’t been here in ages?” Lartz grumbled. “Now that you mention it, though, I don’t think I’ve seen you order anything other than samella.”

“What can I say? This joint’s samella tastes just like the stuff my old lady used to make. Not saying it’s good, mind you, but I just get the urge to eat it every once in a while.”

“Would it kill you to compliment my cooking?” snapped Lartz as he went off to prepare Mireille’s meal.

Pham, meanwhile, had watched their whole exchange with keen interest. This “Mireille” woman had caught his eye—she was clearly not your average patron, so he decided to look into her and get a feel for what sort of person she was.

“Who’s she?” Pham asked, sidling up to Lartz as he cooked.

“Hmm? Oh, that’s Mireille. She’s an old regular here and a nasty drunk.”

That cured Pham’s curiosity in an instant. Apparently, his first impression had been off the mark—the woman was nothing more than a hopeless bum.

“Who’s that cutie you’ve got over there with you?” Mireille called from across the bar.

“Huh? Her name’s Rin,” Lartz shouted back. “She’s a new hire. Real looker, ain’t she?”

“Hmm...” Mireille gave Pham a long, appraising look. Something about the way she stared at him felt unsettling. It was like she could see right through him, somehow.

Eventually, she turned away and muttered, “Eh, none of my business,” whatever that meant. In an instant, Pham’s opinion of her once again pivoted. He could tell on an instinctual level that this was a woman to be cautious

around.

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“Ahhh, yeah, that’s the stuff! Tastes just like it used to!” said Mireille as she dug into the meal Lartz had made for her. Pham, who had brought the dish to her table, watched as she ate. For all her insults, she made it look like the most delicious meal in the world. Mireille polished off her food, drained her glass in a single swig, then shouted, “Another, barkeep!”

“Comin’ right up,” said Lartz. He refilled her glass, set it down in front of her, then leaned onto the bar. “So? Where’ve you been skulking around these past two years?”

“All over Summerforth. I’ve been traveling. I took the grand tour of all seven duchies and their major cities. You’d be surprised at how much the culture, the food, even the language and how the people look can vary from duchy to duchy. Guess that’s a given, since they used to be their own countries and all.”

“Hmm,” muttered Lartz. “Never been outta Arcantez myself, let alone to another duchy.”

“And for a barkeep like you, that sorta lifestyle works just fine.”

“Sounds to me like you’re mocking me again.”

“But y’know what?” continued Mireille, ignoring Lartz’s protest. “No matter where I went, I couldn’t find a noble willing to take me in! Bastards don’t know talent when they see it—not one of them!”

“If anyone took a look at you and saw talent before they saw danger, they’d

be just as crazy as you are,” jabbed Lartz. “Not to mention that you’ve got the manners of a wild animal. I’d bet money you went up to most of those nobles and insulted ’em to their faces, right? Hell, you’re lucky you didn’t offend anyone enough to put an end to you then and there.”

“Etiquette’s the worst standard to judge character by,” countered Mireille. “When I judge someone, I’m judging whether or not they’re capable—nothing else. The rudest son of a bitch on the continent could be the best candidate for the position, for all you know, and if you can’t figure that out, you’ve got no right to be lordin’ it up over others. And anyway, it’s not that I didn’t get run through by some lordling ’cause I was lucky. Trust me—they tried. I just turned the tables on ’em every time.”

“Boasting ’bout that just proves my point, y’know?”

The longer the conversation dragged on and the more Pham eavesdropped, the more curious he became. Who was this woman? No ordinary person would talk about traveling the continent and looking for a lord to serve, that was certain. And even though she hadn’t managed to find a lord who’d take her up on the offer, she seemed to have absolute faith in her own abilities.

“Come to think of it, weren’t you a noble?” asked Lartz. “Why not just go running back to your little upper-crust family?”

“Considering the state of things, I could do that. Thing is, I’ve got my pride, y’know? I’m not about to go crawling back to a man who gave me the boot, begging him to take me on as a retainer again.”

“Heh! Sure you aren’t,” chuckled Lartz. “I never believed you worked in the castle to begin with, myself.”

“I did, so your loss.”

She worked in the castle...? thought Pham. The only castle they could have been referring to was Castle Arcantez. That meant there was a chance that this mystery woman would have at least some degree of inside information on the citadel. On the other hand, he knew it had been at least two years since she was driven from her position, so she knew nothing about the current state of affairs. Not to mention the obvious question of whether or not she was making all of this up in the first place. Pham hesitated—was it worth putting in the effort to ply Mireille for information?

“Anyway, I had myself quite the fortune built up when I left, y’know? But I used it all up on my trip, and now I don’t have a coin to my name. How’s a girl supposed to get by without an income in this day and age?”

“Not a coin to your name, eh?” Lartz chuckled for just a moment before his expression darkened. “Wait. Not a coin to your name? You mean ‘not a coin to my name *after* I pay my tab,’ right?”

“Lartz, please. Have I ever been careless with my word choice? I mean I don’t have a coin to my name right now, so I don’t have the cash to pay for anything. I just happened to know a joint with a kindhearted owner who’d be happy to treat an old regular to a meal on the house.”

“Well, it has been a long time,” Lartz began, only to shoot Mireille a glare. “As if! Have two years on the road addled your brain, woman?! You’re paying back every copper you owe me!”

“Well, *someone’s* a miser! Look, I hate to say it, but I can’t hand over coppers I don’t have. This one’s on you for not making me pay in advance.”

“I’ve met burglars less brazen than you,” growled Lartz. “Anyway, that necklace you’ve got on looks like it’d fetch a coin or two. If you can’t pay with cash, you’ll have to pay with that instead.”

“Have you lost your mind, Lartz? You think a meal and a couple of drinks could possibly be worth a piece like this? And even if they did, I’m not handing it over to anyone. If I didn’t have this necklace on, I’d look like a dead-broke vagabond!”

“No worries there—that’s already what you are. It’s pay with your goods or pay with your body, no third way about it.”

“Oh, so that’s how you see me?” said Mireille with a salacious grin. “Sorry, though, you can’t get your hands on a beauty like me for that cheap!”

“I mean I’ll have you work your tab off, you maniac! Don’t you go putting words in my mouth!”

“What? You mean you want me to do your chores?” asked Mireille, looking positively scandalized.

“Right. And if you don’t like the sound of that, you can hand over the necklace and go on your way.”

“Eh, not like I have anywhere else to go. You win, I’ll do your dirty work. What a disaster today’s turned out to be, I swear...”

“Took the words right outta my mouth,” grumbled Lartz.

And so, Mireille wound up working at Kentlan’s. Pham had no clue what to make of the development, but he did know one thing: whatever was happening, it had him more than a little unsettled.

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“Ugh, I’m exhausted,” moaned Mireille. She and Pham were on the second

floor of Kentlan's, alone in a room together. Their room, specifically. On account of Kentlan's lacking any vacant bedchambers, it was decided that the two of them would have to share one for the moment.

"You're, umm...Rin, was it?" said Mireille. "I'm not planning to be here for long, but good working with you until I split."

"Likewise," Pham replied with a smile.

"Seems we've got some time on our hands, so what say we get to know each other?"

"All right," agreed Pham.

"First up, then—what's a guy like you doing dressed like that?"

Pham was only shaken once in a blue moon, and this was one of those all too rare moments. Never in his wildest dreams had he anticipated Mireille seeing through his disguise. Maybe if she'd seen him disrobed, sure, but she'd had no such opportunity, and he hadn't planned on giving her one.

"What's *that* supposed to mean? I'm a girl!" said Pham, making a show of pouting. There was always a chance that she was just joking around, so it was too soon to overreact and admit that he was in disguise.

"Sorry, I've already got your number. You put a lot of effort into that disguise, I can tell, but it's not enough to fool me."

"You know, I try my best to be a nice person, but even I get mad sometimes!" said Pham, doing his damndest to keep up the act. "Why would you treat me like a boy? You're so mean!"



Mireille smiled...then, in the blink of an eye, reached out for Pham's groin. Pham's reflexes kicked in and he dodged backward, only to realize a split second later that he'd just messed up big time. The groin was a man's biggest weak point. Even someone like him, who was used to pain, would be rendered immobile for at least a second or two by a solid strike to the unmentionables. Those precious few seconds could be a matter of life and death in battle, so defending his groin from attack was a matter of pure, deeply-ingrained reflex for him.

"Now that was one hell of a reaction," said Mireille with a smirk. "Guess that rules out you being a plain ol' cross-dresser, eh?"

Pham knew that if his true profession hadn't already been exposed, then Mireille was more than a little suspicious of him. His cover being blown was a shock, of course, but even more so than that, he was preoccupied by how outrageous of a woman she'd turned out to be—enough so that he found himself questioning her sanity. What kind of person would go straight for someone's groin with such little pretext? He hadn't seen it coming, so it took him a moment to compose himself and come up with an excuse.

"I've always attracted the wrong sort of attention, and I've gotten good at dodging when people try to grab me thanks to that," said Pham. "That, and you're right—I am a boy. I have some circumstances that've forced me to pretend to be a girl, though. You know how it is. Please don't tell Lartz, okay?"

Pham had decided to give up on hiding his sex. He knew that sticking to a cover that had already been blown would just call the rest of his story into question. By admitting that she was right about one thing, he hoped to encourage her to believe the rest of what he told her in the process. Thankfully, his sex was the least damaging thing she could've figured out about him.

“Hmm. That’s a dangerous look in your eyes...but I’ll leave it at that, for now,” said Mireille. She still had her doubts, but it didn’t seem like she wanted to press the issue.

“Umm... You don’t think it’s weird for a boy to dress like this...?” asked Pham, feigning an air of tragic anxiety.

“It’s weird, sure, but I don’t give a damn. Not like you’re hurting anyone, and hey, everyone’s got a little weirdness going on deep down.”

“O-Oh, okay. Thank goodness...” Pham sighed. “The truth is...I do have reasons for dressing this way,” he added, then proceeded to tell a tale to justify his cross-dressing that was as heart-wrenching as it was untrue. By revealing a fabricated past, he hoped to clear away Mireille’s doubts and trick her into revealing her own past at the same time. Pham was, at this point, invested in figuring out just who she was and what made her tick.

“Hmm... You’ve had it pretty rough too, haven’t you?”

“‘Too’?” repeated Pham, eyes wide. “You mean you’ve been through something like that as well, Miss Mireille?”

“Sure have. And y’know what, why not? I’ll make an exception and let you in on my whole history,” said Mireille. And just like that, she launched into her life story. “Y’know the Duke of Missian? The one that kicked the bucket a while back? Well, when I was younger, he met me and my little brother, and decided we had the talent to serve him. He had a good eye for people, too. My brother had a knack for battle and ended up as Vasmarque’s right-hand man. I, meanwhile, ended up getting appointed baroness of a territory of Arcantez called Pelnolla. Used to be the barony the duke’s house ruled over, so he had the power to hand it right off to me. I did my part in battle, too—won the man a fair few victories of my own.”

“O-Oh, wow,” gasped Pham. “Does that mean that you’re nobility?”

“Eh, I was...until I got stripped of my title, anyway.”

“Why did they do that?”

“Could’ve been any number of things,” replied Mireille with a shrug. “Bad behavior, unconventional methods of ruling over my barony—I think it was something along those lines. ’Course, that was just the pretext.”

“You mean it wasn’t the real reason? Then what was?”

“That...is a secret,” said Mireille with a sly grin.

“Aww,” Pham pouted. He hadn’t been planning to sell the information he extracted from her, to be clear. No, Pham was interested in Mireille herself and was considering suggesting her as a candidate to serve as Ars’s newest retainer. Assuming her story was true, she had the potential to be useful. Her personality seemed liable to cause problems, but if the recruitment went through, there’d be no need for Pham himself to bother plying her for information. And, above all else, even if she turned out to be worthless, there wouldn’t be any consequences for letting her take her shot at the position. Pham resolved himself to recommend her for the job.

“Umm, Miss Mireille? You were talking about wanting to serve a lord earlier, weren’t you?”

“Hmm? That’d be nice, yeah,” Mireille replied. “I’ve got nowhere else to go. ’Course, searching for a patron hasn’t been getting me anywhere so far.”

“I think I know someone who might be just right for you. Would you like to hear more?”

After asking the Shadows to help look for promising recruits, I decided that I should chip in and made a trip to Canarre to look for people on my own. I'd been there plenty of times for that precise purpose before, but the city was large enough that I knew I wasn't even close to appraising everyone with potential. I was looking out for someone with the skills to be a tactician in particular, but the task turned out to be as difficult as I'd feared it would be.

I had found an inn in Canarre to stay at while I conducted my search, so it had been some time since I'd last returned to my estate. I'd informed my retainers about my extended absence, so if anything happened back home, I'd receive a timely report on the matter.

One evening, I found myself at the inn with Rietz and a few of my other retainers. Charlotte hadn't accompanied us this time—she was busy training up the rest of our army's mages. Strengthening the forces we already had was just as important as recruiting new ones, after all.

Rosell had also accompanied me, but he wasn't staying at the inn with us. Telling him that he might have to attend a war council seemed to have lit a fire under him, and he'd asked that I give him more chances to study. He'd already read through all the books at my estate, though, so I ended up asking Lumeire if he could let Rosell look into the books at Castle Canarre. Thankfully, Lumeire was happy to oblige, and Rosell had taken to spending his nights at the castle as a result.

The inn we were staying at was quite close to the Tremps. I'd made sure to inform the pub's owner, Alex, where we were staying. That way, Ben would be able to report to me the moment he arrived in town. Of course, it hadn't been

very long at all since his last report, so I wasn't expecting that to happen any time soon.

My expectations, however, were overturned when Alex arrived at my door.

"Hey, Lord Ars! Ben's here to see you," he said.

"Already?" I asked, surprised.

"Ayup. Says they found a recruit for you to meet."

Now that was even more of a shock. I hadn't expected them to find anyone that fast. Alex looked apprehensive, though, which confused me.

"This is just my opinion, but I think you oughta keep your hopes low. Their 'recruit' just looks like some washed-up lady to me."

So the Shadows brought a woman over?

That was yet another surprise. Women were looked down upon in our society, and it was rare for people who lacked the ability to see their true potential to take them on as retainers.

Did she do something that impressed Pham?

"In any case, I'd like to meet her," I replied. "Is she in the usual room?"

Alex nodded.

"Then we'll leave at once. Rietz?"

"Right away."

The two of us stepped outside and made for the Tremps. We arrived at our destination soon after, climbed the stairs, and stepped into the room where we always met our contact with the Shadows. Standing inside was Ben, whose face struck me as unremarkable and unmemorable as ever, alongside a woman

whose presence was so intense that I almost didn't notice Ben at all for a second.

She was very tall, looking to be around the same height as Rietz or so. Her rather unkempt black hair reached down to her waist, and the look in her eyes was so piercing that for a moment, I was overwhelmed.

"Don't tell me you're the Baron of Lamberg?" asked the woman as I stared at her.

"I am," I replied.

"Well, I'll be. You're still just a brat, aren't'cha?"

That was not the sort of attitude one was supposed to take with a noble. It was downright rude in general, and I noted that Rietz was already frowning at her. I'd never been bothered by a little impoliteness, though, so it didn't get to me.

"May I assume that you've come here to enter my service?" I asked.

"That's right. I wasn't expecting a kid, but at this point, I don't even care. I'll take what I can get."

Rietz's expression grew even more irate. It seemed he didn't appreciate the implication that the woman was settling for me.

"Your name?" I asked.

"Mireille Grunzeon," she replied.

Grunzeon. That name rings a bell—where have I heard it before?

I knew it was familiar, but I just couldn't bring the specifics to mind.

Guess I might as well start with an appraisal, I thought. However, before I had the chance, Mireille spoke up again.

“So, I hear you’ve got a good eye for people, eh, kiddo? Or that’s what Rin told me, anyway. Kind of a dubious talent for someone your age to have, gotta say.”

I decided to reply before I used my skill.

“I do, yes, but who is ‘Rin’?”

Ben sidled up to me and leaned down to whisper, “That’d be the boss,” in my ear.

I whispered back to ask what all the whispering was about. He explained that since Mireille wasn’t working for me yet, they were keeping her in the dark about the Shadows. Ben still had a ton of information left to share with me, and he was currently pretending to be an ordinary bystander who was just waiting around to discuss something unrelated with me. Pham had discovered Mireille, and Ben was pretending to be his big brother. Anyway, the whole thing they had going on seemed way too complicated for my tastes, so I decided not to delve into the details.



“What’re you two whispering about? Feel like letting me in on the fun?” asked Mireille. “Not that I care, I guess. So, how about it? Is your eye for talent telling you that I’ve got what it takes?”

“Give me just a moment,” I replied, then appraised her.

Mireille Grunzeon
Age: 30
Female
Status:
LEA: 93/98
VAL: 70/72
INT: 102/103
POL: 51/55
Ambition: 100
Aptitudes:
Infantry: B
Cavalry: C
Archer: C
Mage: B
Fortification: C
Weaponry: A
Naval: C
Aerial: C
Strategy: S

Her status screen was, in a word, astonishing. Her Leadership was high, but her Intelligence was even higher—a maximum score of 103 put her in the absolute top tier of stats I’d seen. Even better, her current score had already broken the hundred mark, meaning she had a higher Intelligence than both

Rosell and Rietz. Plus, while her Valor of 70 and B-ranked Mage aptitude didn't tower above the competition, they were rather high. Perhaps her high Valor was related to her height and the athleticism that it implied in my mind?

Her Politics, however, was pretty low. That wasn't too much of a shock, since she didn't seem to be the cooperative sort. It wasn't the biggest downside, and overall her stats were pretty fantastic. But there was one point that grabbed my attention most: her Ambition. It was sitting at a score of 100. Up until this point, I'd thought 99 was the maximum score, but apparently, that had been a faulty assumption.

An Ambition of 100 was outrageous. I'd never seen someone with a score like that before—never even imagined it. Hell, I'd been shocked when I saw Licia's score of 80! And yet, Mireille was a full twenty points above her? Even if I did bring her to my side, it felt like it was only a matter of time before she'd betray me.

Hmm...this is a real stumper.

Her stats were exactly what I'd been hoping for. An Intelligence as high as hers was ideal for my purposes. Considering her age, I assumed she'd been through a lot, and that those experiences had led to her developing her current score. Rosell had great potential in the long run, but in the current moment, she had him beat by a hefty margin. Even better, Mireille could teach Rosell an awful lot. If I were to hire her, I knew she'd make the perfect instructor to take over Rietz's current role.

The merits of bringing her into my fold were impossible to ignore, but so was her Ambition score. I knew not to judge her on that one factor, though, so I decided to interview her to try to get a feel for her personality.

"To start, I'd like you to tell me a little about your origins," I said.

“My origins, eh? Sure, makes sense. Can’t imagine there’s a lord out there who’d take someone in as a retainer without knowing where they came from.”

That was more or less what I’d done when I offered Rietz and Charlotte positions among my retainers. In retrospect, it was rather careless of me. Then again, it wasn’t like I could’ve afforded to let talent like theirs go, so maybe my imprudence was for the best.

Mireille began to tell me her life story. She explained how she’d risen to a position as a Missian noble, and achieved great things in battle. A woman becoming a lord was rare in this region, and she was supposedly a household name in her home territory, but I’d never heard of her, and I had some doubts about whether the whole of her story was true. Of course, I had to keep in mind that Lamberg was quite far away from the barony she claimed to have ruled over. It was plausible that I’d just never heard of her thanks to that distance.

In any event, Mireille’s stint as a baroness had been a brief one. She lost the position about a year after she was granted it. Her territory was also just about as small and insignificant as Lamberg, which backed up the idea that her celebrity had been a very local affair. Considering her stats, I was convinced that if she’d remained a lord, she could’ve ended up renowned throughout the whole duchy. Instead, she’d been cast out.

As for the reasons behind her losing her title, Mireille claimed that she’d been blamed for matters beyond her control. I couldn’t say with any certainty whether that was true, but it was possible. This was also around the time that it came out that she had a little brother who was working as Vasmarque’s right-hand man.

That helped me put the pieces together. Couran had told me about a man named Thomas Grunzeon who was one of Vasmarque’s most trusted advisors.

According to Couran, Thomas was an extraordinarily intelligent individual. That, coupled with their shared last name, had me convinced: Mireille's little brother was the very same man. And if that assumption proved true, then the odds were good she had at least some degree of inside information regarding his methods. I couldn't have asked for a more capable tactician under these circumstances.

I was, however, still curious about why our enemies had chosen to drive her away. The fact that she'd managed to work her way up to a lordship in spite of society's views on women implied that she had to be pretty darn capable. If they drove her out anyway, there was probably a good reason.

She must've caused some sort of big problem, right?

I was more than a little apprehensive about the possibility.

"I wouldn't dream of second-guessing your judgment when it comes to recruitment and personnel, Lord Ars," said Rietz, leaning in to whisper in my ear. "But this woman strikes me as dangerous. I would recommend against bringing her into your service."

"Dangerous? How so?" I asked.

"Hmm... I'm afraid it's hard for me to explain in specific terms. Call it instinct, if you will. She framed herself as the victim of conspiracy in regard to her dismissal, but we have to account for the possibility that she is deceiving us."

It seemed I could count Rietz's vote as a solid "nay," then.

I'm going to have to think carefully about this one.

"Think you could give me an answer before I fall asleep over here, kiddo? Arcantez wasn't exactly an afternoon stroll away from here, so I'm pretty worn out," said Mireille.

I took one last moment to assess the situation. A very important factor I hadn't taken into account yet was that if I didn't hire her, it was very possible my enemies would take her into their service once more. Whatever had caused her dismissal, it had happened years ago. Given the turbulent political climate, it seemed possible that they would decide to let bygones be bygones if it meant getting her talent again. I did not want her as a foe, that was for sure—she could cause me all sorts of problems.

That left me with one choice: I would take Mireille on as one of my retainers. In the end, I just couldn't bring myself to say no to a talent like hers. I knew I'd regret it if I let her slip away from me. Her personality might become an issue, sure, but that just meant I'd have to learn to work around her foibles. And if it turned out she was too much for me, then, well, I'd just have to deal with that problem. This wasn't a Licia-type situation, after all—I wouldn't be bound to Mireille for life if I made her my retainer.

"I've made up my mind," I announced. "I have determined that you are an exceedingly capable individual. I would very much like to take you into my service."

"Oh, would you?" said Mireille with a grin. "Guess this means you do have an eye for talent, kid. I wouldn't come all the way out here just to say no, so this sorta goes without saying, but I'm in. I'll be your retainer."

"Are you sure about this?" asked Rietz, leaning down to whisper directly into my ear in a more urgent tone than last time.

"I also think she's dangerous, but that doesn't change the fact that she's exceptional," I replied. "I've decided that the merits outweigh the risks. Hiring her is our best option."

"Hmm... Well, if you say so. I'll trust your judgment, Lord Ars."

He still sounded apprehensive, but at the very least, he wasn't going to oppose my decision.

It was already after dark, so we ended up staying the night in Canarre. The next morning, we set off to bring Mireille back to my estate.

○

A few days had passed since I'd brought Mireille into my service. Things had been quiet so far, and I had yet to receive notice that Couran would be calling a war council meeting.

I was sitting in my room when I heard Rietz's voice from outside.

"Lord Ars? May I speak with you for a moment?"

"Come in," I replied.

"Thank you," said Rietz as he stepped inside. I could tell that he was in a somewhat sour mood. "I was hoping to talk with you about Mireille..."

"What about her?"

"Umm..." Rietz hesitated for a moment, then spoke up once more. "I apologize for my insolence, Lord Ars, but I have concluded that she is unfit to serve as your retainer."

Mireille had only been my retainer for a matter of days, and she'd already proven herself to be something of a handful. In fact, this was far from the first time I'd received a complaint about her from one of my other retainers.

The situation in Missian was unstable, but open conflict had yet to break out. As such, I'd tasked Mireille with training our troops and acting as Rosell's

teacher. Her Valor score was high, and she had a decent Infantry aptitude as well. She was capable enough in combat to defeat the average man one-on-one without difficulty. That wasn't the extent of her talents, though—she was also competent in the realm of magic, and had taken on the training of our mages. The one problem: her motivation. She would frequently slack off and not show up, and even worse, she'd encourage others to do the same.

"I'll acknowledge that she is quite capable, but she does not have a temperament suitable to her position. Just this afternoon, she neglected to finish her work in favor of returning to her room and sleeping. Even when she does bother making an appearance at the training grounds, her instructional methods are more often than not haphazard and unenthusiastic. When asked to reassess her attitude, she'll make some nonsensical excuse about how 'everyone has an off-day every once in a while,' making it clear that she has no intention of improving her work ethic. She is talented, yes, but that does not change the fact that on the whole, her presence is a detriment to House Louvent!"

By the end of his speech, Rietz's face was beet-red. If one thing was clear to me above all else, it was the fact that he was very, *very* upset. Unfortunately for him, my mental arithmetic assigned more weight to Mireille's abilities than his did. I still couldn't bring myself to let go of her in spite of her eccentricities.

"I'm coming in, Ars!" called Rosell from outside, moments before he barged into my room. He looked just about as upset as Rietz was. "We need to talk about Mireille. I know you said she'd be teaching me from now on, but I can't take it anymore!"

Rosell wasn't the sort of person who was easily angered, but for once, he seemed furious.

“What happened?” I asked.

“Well, for one thing, she’s a lazy bum who spends most of her time asleep!” Rosell began. “That wouldn’t be so bad if it were the sole problem, but when she does wake up, she starts talking about how ‘reading’s a waste of time’ and takes me outside to run around doing this or that! Then when we’re finished and I ask what the point of it all was, she’ll tell me to ‘think about it and figure it out’! I know she’s just making excuses, though! She’s making fun of me, plain and simple! I don’t even need a teacher anymore, so I don’t care if she spends all her time asleep, but I will not tolerate her getting in the way of my studies!”

I sighed. Apparently, Rosell had built up quite the grudge in just a few days.

Hmm—could it be that we just don’t understand what it is that Mireille’s trying to accomplish?

I still didn’t feel like I had a solid grasp of her personality, so I couldn’t say what her goal with all of this was.

More and more complaints about Mireille’s behavior kept rolling in from my other retainers. They all tended to fit into the same broad categories, too. They were either about her utter lack of work ethic or about how she’d said something offensive to someone. Her popularity among House Louvent’s employees was falling by the day. I knew that I wouldn’t be able to evaluate her performance until I’d seen how she handled herself in battle, but it was becoming clear that I’d need to give her situation some more thought before that time arrived.

Just as I was thinking that I’d have to give her a personal talking-to, I heard a thunderous roar from somewhere outside.

“Wh-What in the world was that?” asked Rietz.

“Whatever it was, it scared me half to death!” said Rosell.



The three of us hurried outside to figure out what in the world that noise had been, though not before taking a moment to arm ourselves. It wasn't unthinkable that we were under attack, and we had to be prepared for the worst. As we sprinted out of the estate, the soldiers who'd been out on the training grounds joined up with us to investigate.

It didn't take long to track down where the noise had originated. There was a copse of trees just a short ways away from my estate, the better part of which had been transformed into a crater. My mind flashed back to the time we'd had Charlotte test her magic out in a field, and speaking of which, Charlotte and Mireille were standing at the edge of the crater together.

"Damn," said Mireille. "Didn't know we had a mage with that sorta talent. I'm shocked, not gonna lie."

"That wasn't even my full power," boasted Charlotte.

"For real? Let's see you shoot another, then."

"Can do."

"*No* can do! Sto-ooop!" I bellowed, charging in to stop Charlotte before she took it upon herself to turn the rest of the copse into a scorched wasteland. If she'd been casting spells, then the ear-splitting explosion made perfect sense.

"L-Lord Ars," said Charlotte, who was shocked to see me.

I stopped to take a deep breath and asked, "Charlotte...why?"

"Miss Mireille told me she wanted to see me cast a spell, so I did," explained Charlotte. She was more or less the sole exception among my retainers when it came to Mireille, and had taken quite the shine to my newest recruit.

"Well, using magic that powerful is dangerous, and it could cause a panic!" I

shouted. "You couldn't have considered holding back?"

"That wouldn't have been nearly as fun," said Mireille. "I heard that Charlotte was something special, so I wanted to see what she could do when she goes all out. She blew my expectations away, that's for sure!"

"And you didn't feel like informing me before you attempted this little experiment?"

"Oh. Yeah, my bad. But I swear, I didn't think it'd be that wild."

It didn't seem like her intentions had been bad, and it wasn't like I failed to see how Charlotte's magical firepower could have surpassed her wildest expectations. However, my opinion wasn't the problem. The rest of my retainers' pent-up resentment was already close to hitting critical mass, and her insincere non-apology was the spark that set that resentment ablaze and converted it into pure rage.

"Are you kidding me?!" shouted one of my soldiers.

"Enough is enough, dammit!" added another. The entire contingent of retainers who'd followed me outside was starting to turn against her, and by "her," I meant Mireille. Charlotte was the one who'd cast the spell, but nobody seemed interested in blaming *her*.

"What's your problem, people? You want me to quit? Is that it?" asked Mireille as their jeers continued. She seemed as proud and arrogant as ever, even in the face of all that abuse. "Well, that's the kid's call to make. What do you think? Do I get the boot?"

"I..." I began, then paused to think. "I don't intend to relieve you from my service. That said, I may consider it if things continue as they've gone so far."

"Hmm. Well, that's a bit of an issue from my perspective," said Mireille. "I'm

just being myself, y'know? Kinda hard to change who I am as a person at this age. Besides, I'm the sort of person who proves her worth on the battlefield, not during peacetime."

In other words, she's not planning on working on her attitude at all.

She'd been eager to place the blame for the loss of her barony on some conspiracy, but I was starting to suspect that it was a simple matter of her superiors getting sick of her crap and deciding she wasn't worth the trouble.

"Can't say I wanna quit, though," Mireille added. "Oh, I know. You said something about a practice battle coming up soon, right?"

"That's right."

I had a policy of getting all of House Louvent's troops together for practice battles on a regular basis, and the next one was scheduled to occur in just two days. It would be the first one Mireille would participate in.

"How 'bout this," said Mireille. "If I prove my stuff in your practice battle, you don't kick me out. Sound fair?"

Before I could give her an answer, everyone behind me broke out in protest over her terms. I, however, thought that it was a very good idea. I'd brought her into my service in the hopes that she'd be an asset in battle, after all. So long as she proved herself useful on that front, I was willing to turn a blind eye to her eccentricities...until the current war was over.

"Listen to me," I said, turning to face the crowd. "I've judged Mireille's talent for myself, and I assure you that she has an incredible knack for battle. I acknowledge that she has no small number of flaws outside of that field, but assuming she manages to produce results in this next mock battle, I hope you'll overlook those problems."

My retainers weren't happy to hear that, but they begrudgingly accepted my terms and stopped heckling Mireille.

○

House Louvent carried out mock battles regularly. We did our best to emulate the feel and circumstances of a real battlefield, but it went without saying that we weren't about to go killing off our own men during practice. As such, a few things set these sessions apart from the real deal.

Our skirmishes were dictated by a set of broad rules. To start, battles were fought between two forces of fifty men, plus their commanding officers. The scenario often revolved around one side arriving to assault Lamberg, while the other side sallied forth into a nearby field to mount a defense. Thus, one force was designated the attacking army and the other the defenders. The attackers would start a fair distance away and march upon the town, while the defenders would set up in the plains nearby to intercept them.

Victory was won by either taking out the enemy force's commander, or otherwise by forcing them to surrender. Each force consisted of thirty infantrymen, fifteen archers, and five mages. We didn't field any cavalry in our mock battles, and our infantrymen were armed with wooden swords. Getting hit by one of those still hurt like hell, but everyone was also equipped with armor and protective gear, so there was almost no danger of anyone dying.

The archers, meanwhile, were using wooden arrows with tips that had been both blunted and wrapped with a bundle of cloth dipped in red paint. The same paint was applied to the infantry's swords—that way, it was always obvious

when someone had landed a fatal blow on their foe. If someone was hit in the head, the chest, or anywhere else that proved fatal, they were declared dead and taken out of the exercise.

As for the mages, fire magic was too dangerous to use in any capacity, so it was banned outright. There *was* such a thing as defensive fire magic, but it was only used to defend against offensive fire magic, so with the latter banned, there was no point in using the former. Further complicating matters was the fact that the only types of aqua magia that weren't rare and valuable in Missian were flame-and sound-aspected. In short, the sole type of magic that could be used in our drills was sound. Sound magic had very few offensive applications, but it was important for stuff like delivering orders to your troops from a range, which made it an essential tool in battle.

The commander of the defenders would be Rietz, while I would be taking charge of the attacking team. Commanding an army to assault my own barony was a strange feeling, to say the least! Mireille would also be supporting the attacking team, while the defenders had Rosell and Charlotte on their side. Rosell, by the way, had started taking part in these exercises not too long ago, and had been more or less serving the role of a tactician.

Charlotte was a powerful tool in their arsenal, in theory, but with only sound magic to work with, she wasn't as threatening as she otherwise would've been. That didn't change the fact that they were at an advantage overall, of course, but you also had to take into consideration the fact that even though this was practice, a lot of our soldiers would still hesitate to swing a sword at me. In short, comparing our advantages and disadvantages wasn't so simple.

Mireille, meanwhile, had asked to be put on my team. She didn't explain why, but I assumed she was hoping that if she was on my team, our soldiers would

listen to her orders. She wasn't popular among my troops, and there was a real danger that they'd ignore her commands if she gave them directly. It would be another story, however, if she were advising me and I were passing on her suggestions to the rest of our force. As far as I was concerned, having Mireille on my team meant I'd have a much easier time evaluating her skills, so I didn't object to the plan.

Two days after we agreed to Mireille's trial, the day of the mock battle arrived. I'd spent the past two days worried that a war council would be called at the worst possible moment and we'd have to discard this whole plan, but nothing of the sort ended up happening.

Me and my fifty-soldier squad set out from the estate, traveling about half a mile away from Lamberg. We'd stage our assault on Lamberg from there. When we first started doing these drills, I'd thought that having to walk all the way out and back again would put the attacking team at a disadvantage, but I soon realized that plenty of factors worked to the attackers' advantage as well. It wasn't so easy to say which side was the more favorable role, but regardless, this was a training drill, not some sporting event. A little imbalance in the scenario wasn't always a bad thing. Learning how to compensate for your disadvantages and how to make use of your advantages was part of what made these exercises worth running.

As we made our way out to our team's starting point, Mireille struck up a conversation with me.

"I know this is just a drill, but this'll be my first battle in ages."

"Will it, now?"

"Yup. I used to all but live on the battlefield, but I haven't taken part in a good fight since I got chased out. What about you? Had your first campaign yet,

kiddo?”

“Not yet, no,” I admitted. I had yet to witness a real battle so much as once.

“That so? Guess you are still a kid, then. Little practice skirmishes like this are fun and games compared to the real deal, y’know? You’d better keep that in the back of your mind. If you start thinking you’ll get used to combat through these little matches, you’ll be in for a rude awakening when the time comes.”

“I know that already,” I replied.

“Oh? Should’ve guessed. You seem like a sharp one.”

I’d heard about the trials and terrors of real battles from more than a few people, and I’d gotten the impression that they were rather horrific. The practical application of magic to warfare was a recent development, so modern battlefields were a lethal storm of spells of all varieties. Tactics, on the other hand, had yet to catch up to that dramatic paradigm shift, and as such, tacticians who could think on the fly, break free of the established theories, and come up with countermeasures to the enemy’s magic were essential to any army. We would only have access to sound magic this time around, but even that meant our armies would have access to quite a wide variety of spells, and countering their effects was no simple matter.

Back on Earth, wars in the Middle Ages were a lot less nasty than you might expect in terms of the number of casualties and fatalities. In this world, however, war was a lethal affair, and even a single conflict could claim a tremendous number of lives. It wasn’t like most armies would bust out their powerful spells in minor skirmishes, though, so I didn’t imagine I’d be seeing that sort of devastation anytime soon. That wasn’t the case for large-scale battles, however. I’d heard that losses in the tens of thousands were by no means unheard of.

It was rare for military leaders to command from the front these days due to such high losses. The logic was simple: if you were marching in the front of your army's ranks, the odds were good that you'd be dead before the day was done. There were exceptions to that rule—my own father had charged out to lead his troops by example, hacking and slashing his way through the battlefield. The fact that he'd managed to lead like that and come out of each and every engagement alive was unexpected.

A small hut had been designated as the starting point for the attacking team. I led my force up to it, then commanded them to halt.

"All right, then—I've come up with a few plans for us to consider, so let's go over our options," said Mireille, her tone and expression taking a sudden turn. She sounded calm, all things considered. "Magic-wise, we've got sound, and that's it. We also only have medium-sized catalyzers on hand, which means we can use a maximum of thirty M's worth of aqua magia per side. That means we've got four spells in our arsenal today, so we won't have to come up with anything complicated to win this one."

Catalyzers, the tools used to cast magic, came in three sizes: small, medium, and large. The one we'd used to test Charlotte's magic way back when was a small catalyzer that was roughly the size of a baseball. Medium catalyzers were just about basketball-sized, while large ones were around the size of those rubber exercise balls that people sat on. As you might expect, a metal device of that size was heavy and hard to move around, so they were transported using carts. We wouldn't be using any of those in this practice battle. Hell, House Louvent didn't even own any!

The bigger the catalyzer, the larger the volume of aqua magia you could pour into it. That made a big difference, since higher-level spells required a massive

amount of aqua magia. Large-sized catalyzers were used primarily to cast that sort of battlefield-changing super spell. As a side note, the unit of measurement used for aqua magia was M. A small catalyzer could fit three Ms of aqua magia, while the mediums each side could use for the mock battle could fit thirty. Not having anything bigger wasn't an issue because we didn't have the funds to be blowing much more aqua magia than that during practice.

"So the four types of magic we'll be able to use today are, umm...Hyper Voice, Rumble, Transmit, and Noise Trap, right?" I asked.

Each of the available spells had different effects. Hyper Voice amplified the volume of the caster's voice. Rumble created a thunderous roaring noise that could, in theory, distract or disturb your enemy. Transmit allowed you to send sounds across long distances, but there were a bunch of caveats—you had to use a specific sort of catalyzer, for one thing, and you could only send sounds to another catalyzer of the same variety. You had to know a number associated with the catalyzer you were transmitting to, and you couldn't even transmit complex sounds, meaning speech was off the table. Just to make things even more complicated, the maximum possible transmission distance was determined by the caster's magical ability. The final spell was less complicated, at least: Noise Trap was another spell that made a loud roaring noise, but only when somebody passed through an area you designated as you cast the spell.

With medium-sized catalyzers, those four spells would be our entire repertoire for the day. As far as their aqua magia expenditures went, Hyper Voice required two Ms, Rumble and Transmit took three, and Noise Trap took ten. In terms of practicality, Hyper Voice and Transmit were both used to convey information across a battlefield. Noise Trap was also useful, since setting the spell up in strategic locations would allow you to detect the enemy's movements without keeping an active guard posted. Rumble, however, was a

bit of an exception—as far as I knew, it was pretty useless in actual combat.

“I bet they’ll try to ambush us,” said Mireille. That theory seemed convincing to me, considering ambushes had proven to be effective in our practice skirmishes thus far.

The tough part about being on the defending side was that if you tried to mount your defense in the precise location where your troops started, the enemy would know your army’s location and you’d lose the initiative. Losing out in that manner meant putting yourself at a notable disadvantage, and when you had the precise same number of troops as your enemy, that sort of disadvantage would decide the outcome of the battle in your foes’ favor.

Moving your troops out from their defensive position to set up an ambush, on the other hand, had the opposite effect. It could gain you an overwhelming advantage if things went well, and even if you didn’t manage to pull the surprise aspect off, you wouldn’t be fighting on your enemy’s terms.

That might make it sound like there were nothing but upsides to attempting an ambush, but there were a fair few downsides as well. Three situations could bring an end to the match: if a commanding officer was neutralized, if one side surrendered, or if the attacking team managed to slip at least thirty of its troops into the town of Lamberg, in which case the defenders would lose. On the flip side, if the attacking team didn’t manage to accomplish any of those objectives by sunset, the match would be called in favor of the defenders. In other words, if the defenders abandoned their defensive position, the attackers could win by marching right on into town.

There was only one proper road leading into Lamberg from where my team was located. That said, my army was small enough that traveling cross-country was practical. That meant it wouldn’t be easy for our opponents to predict

which route we'd take into town. Typically, the defenders would send out scouts to locate the enemy force. Those scouts would then report back on the attackers' movements via the Transmit spell, and the defenders would set up an ambush along the attackers' chosen route.

"And of course, we're up against Rietz," said Mireille. "If we did march straight in, he'd catch us in an ambush and wipe us out without breaking a sweat."

"You're not wrong about that, but I'm surprised you're giving him that much credit," I replied.

"You're not the only one with an eye for people. I'm not half-bad, either, and I can tell that he's got a real impressive head on his shoulders, and isn't the careless type. If I had to pin his biggest flaw down, I'd say it's that he takes himself too seriously. You hear people go on and on about how Malkans are inferior, but it only takes one guy like him to show how stupid that belief is. Did you pick him out as a retainer 'cause you figured out he was talented at a glance too, kiddo?"

"That's right," I confirmed.

"Then that power of yours might be something special. No matter where you go in the Empire, Malkans get a rough lot in life. I bet Rietz went through some tough times before he joined up with you, eh?"

"He...did, yes," I answered, a little hesitant. When I first met Rietz, he'd lost any semblance of a place where he belonged and had seemed just about ready to give up and die. He'd made a living for himself with a band of mercenaries up until that point, which might've been a decent environment compared to what other Malkans went through.

“Rietz has the potential, no doubts there. The other kiddo you’ve got training to be a tactician, though—Rosell, right? Hate to say it, but he’s not cut out for the role.”

“Why do you say that?” I asked.

“Okay, I should rephrase that. It’s not that he’s not cut out to be a tactician. It’s just that he’ll never be first-rate, no matter what he does. He’s got the brains, don’t get me wrong! Little guy’s as smart as they come. But you have to be more than just smart to be a tactician. You have to be creative—to have the ingenuity to come up with schemes that your enemy could never possibly see coming, which is something he lacks.”

“Hmm.”

Mireille had a very respectable Intelligence score herself, so I couldn’t dismiss her view of Rosell offhand. That said, Rosell’s Intelligence cap, according to my Appraisal skill, was 109 points. If that was accurate, yet he somehow wasn’t cut out to be a tactician, then I couldn’t even begin to guess what sort of person would be suited to the role.

Mireille might be decent at judging people, but maybe she just can’t see deep enough in Rosell’s case to give him the credit he deserves.

“Come to think of it, Rosell’s been complaining that your way of teaching is, well, pretty strange. Is that because you decided that he doesn’t have any talent?”

“That, and ’cause I’ve never been one for teaching,” Mireille readily admitted. “I do feel the urge to teach people a trick or two when it looks like they’ve got what it takes, but that’s about it.”

“Understood. In that case, I think you’ll find yourself wanting to teach Rosell

for real before too much longer,” I replied.

Mireille arched an eyebrow.

“Oh? You’ve got an awful lot of faith in your ability to judge people, don’t you, kiddo?”

“We’re getting off-topic. We should figure out a plan and move out as soon as possible. Got anything cooking, Mireille?”

“Nothing too complicated. We’ll just send someone over to pretend they’ve double-crossed us, leak false info to the other side, and ambush them when they come looking for us.”

Now it was my turn to arch an eyebrow.

“And you think they’ll fall for that? You think they’ll believe that one of my men would betray me in a training exercise?”

“Eh, should work just fine. I’ve got a few tricks in mind,” replied Mireille. Then, she explained what she was plotting.

“That...does make sense,” I said when she finished. “That might trick Rietz and Rosell.”

“You think? Good. Then let’s pick someone to send out.”

I chose the soldier who’d be playing double agent, and we put Mireille’s plan into motion.

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At the same time, Rietz’s army was holding their ground in the position they’d

started at. Rietz had sent out a few soldiers to scout out the enemy, determine their movements, and report back using the Transmit spell.

The Transmit spell's capability to transmit information was rudimentary. Casting the spell expended some of the aqua magia within the associated catalyzer, and the specialized catalyzers designed for the spell were made to emit a knocking noise when their aqua magia was expended. As such, while transmitting human speech was impossible, transmitting coded messages with a series of knocks could allow mages to communicate with each other. Rietz had sent out one such mage along with one regular soldier to scout ahead and had just received their report.

"Seems they're on the move," Rietz muttered. His scouts had informed him that Ars's team of attackers was beginning to mobilize. He'd already told the scouts to continue observing and reporting after the enemy army began to march, so there was no need for him to send a reply. That was important, since casting the Transmit spell didn't allow one to send a message back without expending more precious aqua magia.

"Where're they headed?" asked Rosell.

"In two different directions," replied Rietz. "It seems they've split their forces, with one traveling along the road and the other through the woods. Lord Ars is proceeding with the group on the road, so our scouts will be following them."

Scouting was, traditionally, a one-mage job. If you sent two mages out to report back, you'd burn through too much aqua magia to transmit all the relevant information. Although splitting your forces meant that neither group would be capable of taking on the enemy's main contingent, you would also more or less guarantee that your enemy would only know the location of one of your two troops. It wasn't an unreasonable plan, given the circumstances.

Rietz and his troops were stationed on a road to the south of Lamberg. The road continued onward due south, and if you followed it for long enough, you would reach the starting point for Ars's forces. Woodlands occupied the areas to the east and west of the road. The western woodlands were dangerous enough that they'd been declared out of bounds for the training exercise, but a known and safe route through the eastern woods made them fair game. A safe route wasn't necessarily an easy route, however, and if you didn't move with caution, you could get lost. Traveling that way was far from simple.

"Now we just have to decide how we deal with them," Rietz muttered. There were any number of ways he could counter the attacking team's chosen strategy. Choosing one enemy troop to crush first with his full might was an obvious option, but splitting his own forces to handle both at once had its advantages as well.

As Rietz and Rosell were just beginning to discuss their options, a booming voice rang out, "Can you hear me, Rietz?! This is Shamal, from the attacking team! I want to talk!"

Shamal was one of House Louvent's mages. It seemed he'd cast Hyper Voice to deliver his message.

"What's this about?" Rietz wondered.

"I say we ignore it," cautioned Rosell.

"I've chosen to betray Lord Ars today, but I do it for his own sake!" Shamal's voice rang out again.

"To betray him...? Is he offering us information?" asked Rietz.

"It's an obvious trap," said Rosell.

"Hmm... But think about the circumstances surrounding this battle," replied

Rietz. The instant that the concept of betraying Ars for his own sake was broached, he'd understood what Shamal was alluding to. If Mireille failed to lead Ars to victory in this battle, it was reasonable to assume that Ars would decide she hadn't contributed in the manner he'd hoped, which would in turn lead to her expulsion from House Louvent. Considering the widespread distaste that Ars's retainers held for her, it wasn't implausible that one of them would decide to betray him here. "I think we should hear him out, just in case."

Rietz ordered that Shamal be brought to him, and Shamal explained the details of Mireille's strategy to Rietz. According to him, Mireille had plotted to have the contingent in the forest pretend that they'd fallen under attack from a real enemy force and sound the alarm. When Rietz's troops rushed in to provide backup, the remaining portion of Ars's troops on the road would mount a surprise attack and wipe the defenders out.

"That plan...doesn't seem to be in the spirit of the rules, does it?" sighed Rietz.

"Yeah, well, it's not like the rules were all that clear cut," noted Rosell.

"Yes, because under ordinary circumstances, nobody would consider putting a plan like that into action. It wouldn't make for good training material."

If there was any chance that a genuine enemy attack had occurred, then Rietz would have to rush in, whether or not he realized that it might be a trap. It would defeat the purpose of a training exercise of this nature. Nobody had tried to carry out an underhanded stratagem like that, so there had never been any reason to prohibit them.

"Of course, I wouldn't put it past that woman to come up with something so brazen," Rietz noted. "Her grasp of common sense is tenuous."

“But she’s not their leader, is she? Ars is. Wouldn’t he stop her?” asked Rosell.

“Perhaps, but she’s a glib one. She may have talked Ars into going along with her scheme...”

Rietz could feel that he was missing something. Mireille had a way with words, to be sure, but Ars was no fool. He couldn’t believe that his lord had fallen for such a trick.

“Yes...you’re right. Everything I’ve just told you is a lie,” said Shamal, shocking everyone present.

“Huh?” grunted Rietz.

“It’s as you guessed, Rietz. Mireille told me to pretend to betray her and feed you false information. The thing is, I *really* hate that woman’s guts,” Shamal said, launching into an extended description of how and why he despised the tactician, concluding with a simple sentiment: “The way I see it, I might as well betray her for real while I have the chance. The plan I told you about before is a lie, but I’m about to tell you what she’s really up to now.”

Thus, Shamal launched into a second explanation of Mireille’s true scheme. In short, her plan started with the leaking of false information to Rietz’s army. She would allow them to get the jump on Ars’s flank, but only briefly—at the most critical possible moment, when their sneak attack was being launched, Shamal would cast Rumble. The spell did nothing more than make a loud and unnerving noise, but when said noise was coming from the center of their own formation, it would shock Rietz’s soldiers and throw off their operation. It would also have a secondary purpose: functioning as the signal for the attacking team to break down the defenders’ ambush and turn the tables on them.

“I think you should pretend to have fallen for their trap,” said Shamal. “After

all, the whole operation hinges on me casting Rumble. If I don't do that, we're left with an actual surprise attack that they won't be prepared for, and once Mireille's plan fails, she'll be chased out of House Louvent. Please, Rietz—make the right call!”

Rietz fell silent. He couldn't decide whether or not to trust Shamal's claim. It went without saying that both of the man's stories could be fabrications, but his final tale was consistent with his motivations, so it seemed plausible. He didn't appear to be lying, but Rietz didn't know him well enough to say whether or not he was a skilled enough actor to pull off such a ruse, and Rietz wasn't dumb enough to take someone's word at face value.

“All right, then. I'll trust you,” Rietz lied. He didn't trust Shamal by any means, but he'd chosen to play along for the time being.

If Shamal was lying, then it was only a matter of time before the fact would be exposed, and the attacking team's next move would become that much easier to predict. If he was telling the truth, on the other hand, then as he'd said, a sneak attack could lead to an easy victory.

Rietz didn't believe that he'd made the best possible choice...but at this point in time, he hadn't the foggiest idea what a terrible mistake he'd just made.

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Rietz directed his troops to march forward. Their destination: the location that Shamal had identified as the position where the attacking team would carry out their operation. Ars would be present in that unit, according to Shamal's information. He also provided a map with the precise location marked

on it, and according to Rietz's scouts, Ars's unit was already on the move toward that position.

Before moving out, Rietz had to confirm one last thing with Shamal: the status of the division that Ars had sent into the woodlands. Shamal explained that they were insurance. If Rietz somehow managed to escape unharmed from the ambush, the backup troops in the woodlands would pursue him and finish him off. Just to be on the safe side, Rietz decided to dispatch ten of his own soldiers to hold that extra division off long enough for the main force to deal with Ars.

That wasn't the only precaution that Rietz took, of course.

"Now then, before we move out, I'll be taking your catalyzer. I'm sure you understand," Rietz said to Shamal. His knowledge of the enemy's plan wasn't clear, and if Shamal was working for them and did cast Rumble to call in a surprise attack, Rietz and his men would be sitting ducks. Fortunately, Shamal handed over his catalyzer—a small-sized one—without protest.

That's strange, thought Rietz as he inspected the device. Catalyzers all had numbers inscribed into them. When a mage cast Transmit, the incantation involved reciting the number associated with the catalyzer they wanted to send a noise to. Something seemed wrong about the number on the catalyzer that Shamal handed over, though.

This catalyzer's number is 23159...but that's not Shamal's number, is it?

Each catalyzer in House Louvent's possession was assigned to a specific individual. Keeping the numbers consistent reduced the possibility of the flow of information becoming tangled. Furthermore, one of the rules for their practice battles was that you were not allowed to use Transmit to send information to the opposing team. Rietz wasn't a mage himself, and as a result, he hadn't had enough exposure to the catalyzers to memorize all of their

numbers, but he still had the strangest feeling that Shamal's was *off*.

But if this is the wrong number...did his break? Or does he have two?

A catalyzer breaking down wasn't unheard of, but it would have been odd for Shamal to have already been casting spells early enough in the drill to get one swapped out. Rietz wasn't sure whether or not Shamal would have had to cast anything to tell that his own catalyzer was broken, but the probability that he was carrying two seemed higher overall. If Shamal had two catalyzers, it would prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that he intended to betray Rietz. Otherwise, he would have handed the spare over as well—there'd be no need to keep it hidden.

Rietz knew that House Louvent's mages all had the catalyzer numbers and their assignments memorized, so he went over to Charlotte in secret and asked her what Shamal's was.

"Huh? Shamal's number?" said Charlotte. "Uh, think that was...22134? Wait, no, 23112? Hmm...nah, sorry, no clue."

"My apologies," sighed Rietz. "I should have asked someone else."

He'd forgotten that Charlotte was bad at memorization, and hadn't committed any of the catalyzer numbers to memory. Her overwhelming magical ability made her an unstoppable force on an actual battlefield, but her inability to use Transmit meant that she was an impediment in a mock battle, if anything.

Rietz found a different mage to ask about the numbers instead.

"23159? No, that's Tenks's number. Shamal's is 23111."

"I thought so," said Rietz with a grimace.

"Oooh, 23111? Dang, I was pretty close," grumbled Charlotte, who had

tagged along with him.

“It would save us a lot of trouble if you’d memorize the numbers yourself, you know?” Rietz sighed.

“Why’s his number different, though?” Charlotte asked. Rietz explained his theory, and she nodded in understanding. “Oh, he has two of ’em? That’d do it for sure.”

“It is strange for a mage to be carrying another mage’s catalyzer,” explained the mage who’d confirmed Rietz’s suspicions about the numbers. “Each catalyzer has a certain feel to it, and it’s much easier to cast with one that you’re used to.”

The fact that a mage found the situation so unnatural only deepened Rietz’s suspicions. Nothing had been proven yet, but this left him with one option: to search Shamal for a second catalyzer. Shamal was opposed to the check at first, but he gave in and allowed himself to be searched. Lo and behold, Rietz soon found a second catalyzer that he’d hidden.

“So tell me, why did you have two of these?” asked Rietz. Shamal didn’t say a word, and Rietz shrugged. “No need to hear it from the horse’s mouth—I already know your answer. According to my scouts, Ars’s unit has reached the location you told us about and is standing by. You were going to wait until we were almost upon them, then use your second catalyzer to cast Rumble. Well, sorry to say, but that plan is a wash now.”

“Tell me about it,” Shamal sighed. “You’re right about everything. Man, I’ve made a real mess of this operation.”

It seemed that passing over the borrowed catalyzer rather than his own had been nothing more than a careless mistake.

“Well then, new plan. We’ll pretend that we’ve fallen for their scheme and head straight for Ars’s unit. They’ll be counting on that Rumble spell to alert them of our presence, which means they won’t see us coming,” said Rietz. He was convinced that the battle was already all but over.

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“So, yeah, at this point, I’m sure they think they’ve already won,” chuckled Mireille with a smirk as she explained how Rietz would be directing his forces.

To sum her plan up in the simplest way possible, she had designed it under the deliberate assumption that her enemies would see through her scheme. Mireille had set Shamal up in a way that made him screwing up and revealing the details of her plan to Rietz and his troops the most likely outcome. According to her, nothing put a person off-guard like the misguided belief that they’d seen through their enemy’s plans. She’d made her fake plan as convoluted as possible to aid in that effort because if the plan that Shamal leaked was too straightforward, Rietz might end up questioning its authenticity.

I was impressed. Mireille’s plan betrayed a remarkable level of psychological analysis on her part. The scouts that we’d sent had reported that Rietz’s troops were already on their way to our position, so now we just had to wait until he was closer to spring our trap and defeat him.

Once Rietz’s army was close enough to ours, we would move to a new location. Casting Transmit required a mage to chant a spell, and that took a hefty period of time. If we could relocate our troops and attack Rietz’s army from a blind spot before his scouts had the time to report back to him, we could

catch him and his men off-guard and enter the battle at a massive advantage.

“Of course, there’s no guarantee that your plan will succeed. Rietz and his people might not have caught on to the part you needed him to figure out,” I noted.

“Yeah, I’m not too concerned about that,” said Mireille with a smirk.

If Rietz had missed Mireille’s convoluted setup, he’d still have made his way to our position. The difference was that in that instance, he would’ve been doing so without letting his guard down. That would require some major alterations to the plan, but it wasn’t a major problem.

All that said, our scouts had reported that Rietz and his troops were moving at a faster pace than usual. They were rushing forward in a manner consistent with them believing they’d seen through our strategy and dropping their guard as a consequence.

Just a little while later, one of the mages on my team received a message through their catalyzer. That was the signal we’d been waiting for—it was time for us to move out.

“All right, let’s get a move on,” I said.

“Right,” agreed Mireille.

I gave the order, and my entire squad began to move out. Rietz’s team wasn’t quite close enough to see with the naked eye yet, so me and my troops were able to move off to the side of the road and circle behind his group without being noticed. I knew that the slightest delay in setting up our trap could have spelled doom for our whole operation, so I urged my forces to move as fast as possible.

It wasn’t long before Rietz’s troops came into view, and we managed to circle

around them without getting spotted. Rietz had ordered his troops to a stop. My best guess was that he was receiving a report from his scouts at that very moment, and I wasn't about to give him the time to act on the information they'd sent him.

First, I ordered our archers to open fire. We peppered Rietz's formation from behind with arrows, thinning their ranks in an instant. That threw their remaining force into a state of mayhem, but Rietz was a competent enough leader to rally them back into formation before the clash began. Unfortunately for him, that preemptive strike by our archers had taken its toll. It was a hard fight, to be clear—much harder than expected, considering we'd gotten the jump on him—but in the end, our team emerged victorious.

"My team has won the day, and we have Mireille's strategy to thank for it," I declared, addressing all of my troops after the battle was done. "As such, her employment with House Louvent will not be terminated."

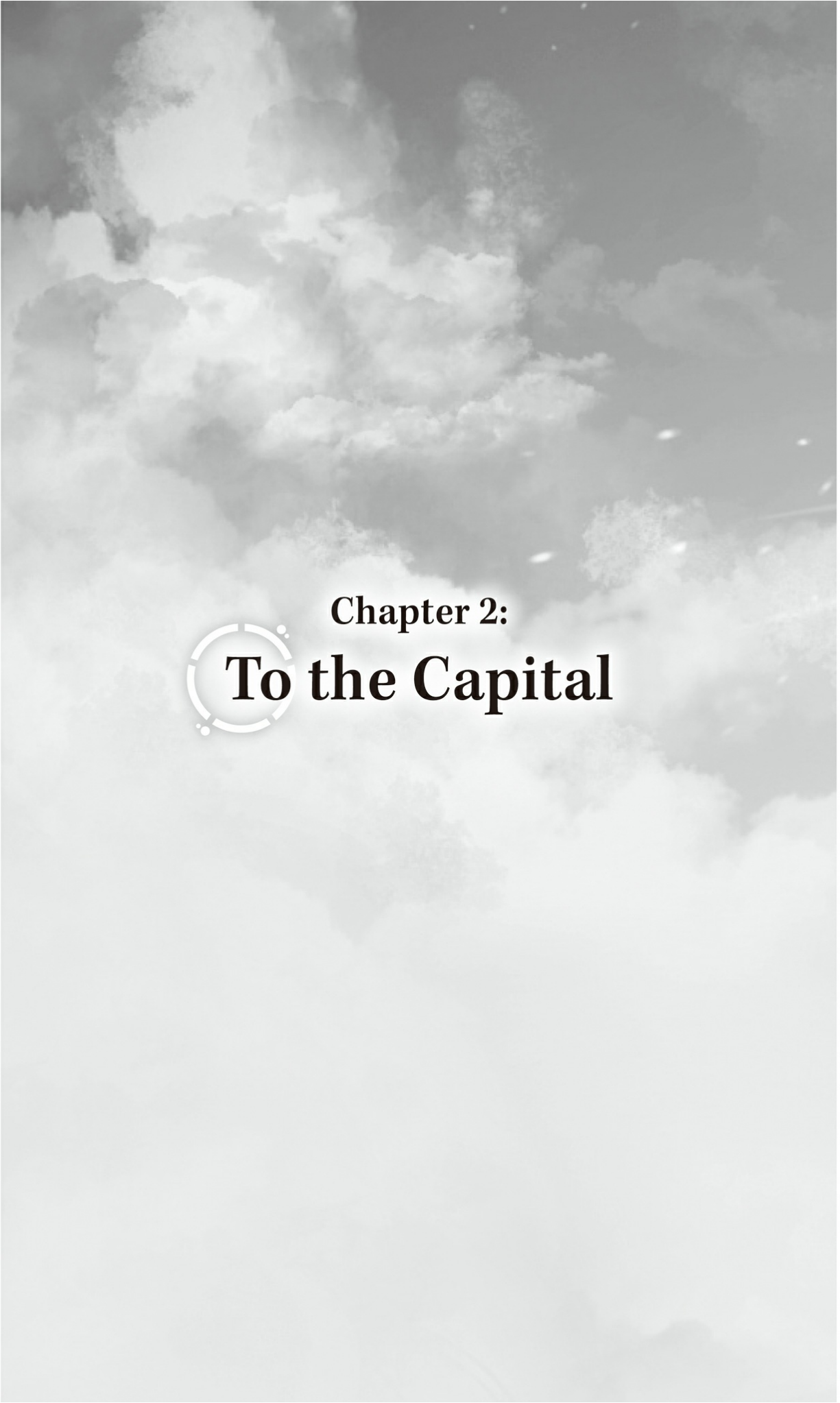
A lot of my troops didn't look very happy about how things had turned out, but they had agreed to the terms and they weren't the sort to break promises. In the end, nobody spoke out against my decision.

"That said," I continued, turning to Mireille. "I can't rule out the possibility that I'll cast you aside if you continue to cause problems. I expect you to be on your best behavior."

"Right, right," replied Mireille with a dismissive wave.

Well, at least she can't say she wasn't warned now.

I was pretty skeptical she'd heed said warning, but in any case, Mireille had earned her place as a retainer of House Louvent.



Chapter 2:

To the Capital



A few days after the mock battle, a letter from Couran ordering me to report in for a war council arrived. The venue: Couran's very own stronghold in Semplar. The County of Semplar was located in southern Missian, a fair ways to the southeast of Lamberg. I'd never been there myself, so I didn't know how long of a journey it was, but I'd been told that it could take up to ten days.

We set about preparing for our departure. Rietz, Rosell, and Mireille would all be going as my resident tacticians, while a number of my soldiers and Charlotte would be accompanying us as guards. We'd be traveling by horse-drawn carriage this time, on account of the length of the trip. We'd have too much luggage to get by on horseback, so bringing a carriage was the practical option.

"All right, everyone," I said when our preparations were complete. "It's time! We ride for Semplar!"

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The road to Semplar wound through a lengthy stretch of flatlands, so it wasn't a particularly treacherous journey. Well, not in terms of the road itself, anyway—the fact that we were set upon by bandits several times after leaving Canarre meant that it was quite treacherous by most standards. I'd never encountered bandits during my journeys within Canarre itself, so either Canarre was a safer county, I'd just gotten lucky, or having a carriage made the bandits peg us as wealthy.

Whatever the case, Charlotte drove off the bandits without breaking a sweat.

Mages appeared to be above the typical bandit's league, since it often only took one spell from her to make them turn tail and scatter to the winds. Charlotte could adjust her spells' output as desired, and I didn't want her leaving craters in our wake, so I had her stick to low-powered warning shots for the most part.

However, every once in a while, we encountered a group of brigands who refused to submit to intimidation. In those cases, we had no real choice but to kill them. It was the first time I'd seen anyone die since my father executed a criminal in front of me, and while it didn't leave me as shaken as that first experience, it still made me sick to my stomach. I wasn't used to death, and I didn't want to get used to it, either.

A few days after our departure, Mireille approached me.

"Hey, look—can't you do something about the kid for me?" she asked, looking frustrated. She was the one who most often made other people make that expression, so this was something of a rarity.

"What kid?" I asked.

"You know, the brat! Rosell! I'm telling you, it's been one question after another from him ever since the training drill!"

"Oh, right..."

My retainers' overall opinion of Mireille hadn't gone up as much as I'd hoped after the mock battle, with one notable exception: Rosell's had skyrocketed. He'd been skeptical about her abilities from day one, but ever since our skirmish, he'd started asking her so many questions that he was getting to be kind of a nuisance. Mireille had told me that she wasn't a fan of teaching, but Rosell was so persistent that she had no choice but to start answering him every once in a while.

As a direct result, Rosell's long-stagnant Intelligence score had grown by a full two points over a very brief period of time. It was now sitting at a healthy score of 93. I had thought for the longest time that his lack of real-world experience was the problem, but it seemed that what he'd lacked might've been a capable enough mentor.

Not that Rietz was someone to scoff at, of course—his Intelligence was plenty high—but at a certain point, Rosell's abilities had grown to the extent that Rietz just didn't have much to teach him. They felt like equals more than a teacher and his student. So perhaps someone with an Intelligence score substantially higher than Rosell's, like Mireille, made a better teacher. Mireille wasn't happy about that arrangement, but she'd just have to deal with it.

"Sorry to ask this, but I'd like you to keep answering Rosell's questions. It'll be good for him," I replied.

"All right, fine. Don't wanna get myself chased out, I guess. Plus, I've started thinking you might be right about him. Feels like he might have the makings of a decent tactician."

"Oh, you think so?"

"Well, every once in a while, he comes up with something *really* out of the box. He's a lot better at understanding stuff and thinking it through than I first thought, too. Not saying he's got what it takes, but I can't rule out the possibility that I misjudged him."

"Then why not take him under your wing?"

"Cause even I've got my limits," grumbled Mireille. "The kid comes after me non-stop! Question after question without a break! I can't go telling him off too much 'cause he's a kid, but he's way harder to persuade than you'd think. I just

can't deal with him."

Guess she's having a harder time than I thought...

I hadn't expected her to be the sort of person who hated people approaching her for help. Still, the fact that Rosell was so interested in having her teach him felt like a step in the right direction.

Hopefully, his Intelligence will keep rising.

A few days later, we arrived in Semplar. The city was located on the coast and was surrounded by a large curtain wall. Unlike Canarre, there was no external portion of the city that was outside of the walls. It looked new as well, so I concluded that they'd been built in recent years.

The gateway into the city was close enough to the ocean that we could see the coast as we made our way inside. I hadn't lived in a land-locked prefecture during my life in Japan and I'd seen the ocean plenty of times, but this was the first time I'd seen it in *this* lifetime. That said, the ocean was just the ocean, even in another world. It was big, blue, smelled like salt, and the sound of the waves lapping at the shore was calming. Everything was as I remembered it.

"So, what's with all the water?" asked Charlotte, who looked downright puzzled. Apparently, this was her first time seeing the ocean.

"That's the ocean. It's my first time seeing it as well," explained Rosell, who sounded more moved than shocked. "It's enormous, huh? It stretches out so far that you can't even see what's on the other side."

"I guess with that much water around, folks here never have to worry about going thirsty," said Charlotte.

"Not quite," I replied. "Seawater's too salty to drink. If you tried, you'd get even thirstier than before."

“Seriously? Then all that water’s useless!”

“It isn’t.”

Calling the whole ocean useless because you couldn’t drink from it felt just plain disrespectful, in a weird sort of way.

After we’d gotten our fill of the ocean, we made our way into the city of Semplar itself. Getting through the gates didn’t pose an obstacle—the guards asked a few questions, then waved us through without much fuss. It became clear as we stepped inside that Semplar either boasted a much higher population than Canarre, or at the very least had a lot more people coming and going. I had memories of my old world, so I wasn’t surprised to see streets packed to the brim with pedestrians, but Rosell and Charlotte were shocked by the sheer number of people who were out and about.

“If memory serves, Semplar has the second highest population of all the cities in Missian,” Rietz explained. The biggest, I had to assume, was the capital, Arcantez.

The size of the crowds wasn’t the only factor that made them so impactful—there was also a palpable sense of energy in the air. The streets were lined with stalls, and the hawkers who manned them were shouting their lungs out to advertise their goods. It seemed like all sorts of rare and interesting things were up for sale, so I found my attention drawn to them. However, the rational part of my brain knew we weren’t here on a shopping trip, so I held myself back.

A massive castle stood far away down the city’s main street. That, I knew, was Castle Semplar: the site of the war council. I was already planning to come back and take the full tour of the city, but for the moment, we had to make our way straight to the castle without wasting a moment.

Before we reached the castle, though, we ran into yet another wall. This one was much older than the first we'd passed through. I assumed that Semplar had once had a similar setup to Canarre, with an inner and outer city. That thought led me to the sudden realization that, considering Canarre was right on Seitz's doorstep and that Seitz had grown more and more aggressive as of late, the town of Canarre was under-fortified at the moment. Of course, building walls took an abundance of time and money, so it wasn't an easy problem to rectify.

Passing through the inner wall required us to present some sort of authorization. I didn't have the sort of permit that locals would use, but I did have the letter of summons that Couran had sent me, which I showed to the guard. That gained us immediate entrance, thankfully. As we stepped into the inner city, I noted that the people here were more well-dressed and the buildings were more refined than those outside. It seemed this was where the rich people lived.

We arrived at the castle proper, I showed the guards my letter once again, and they ushered us through the outer gates.

Castle Semplar looked even more imposing up close than it had from a distance. I was certain that it was much larger than Castle Canarre. More impressive even than its size, though, was its coloration: the entire castle was a brilliant gold. I couldn't tell if it was paint or if they'd covered the whole thing in gold leaf, but the effect was impactful regardless of the method. I'd seen plenty of castles by then, but this was the first golden one I'd encountered. I had to wonder whether that was Couran's personal touch, or if it had always been that way. It seemed like a little too much, and the sheer excess struck me as more tacky than appealing. But as a show of wealth and power, it certainly did its job.

"We have awaited your arrival, Lord Ars Louvent," a man said to me as I

stepped inside. I recognized him as Robinson, the retainer who had accompanied Couran and I when we had our discussion back at the party. “His Lordship Couran has instructed me to escort you to him at once.”

We exchanged a quick greeting, and then Robinson led us to Couran. As we walked through the castle’s corridors, I was again struck by how opulent the place was. The carpets were colored a bright shade of red, while the walls were the same golden color on the inside as they were on the outside. We passed by several statues that seemed to be made of gold and studded with jewels along the way, as well. I had to wonder just how much gold a man could want in his life to justify this sort of design.

My train of thought was derailed, however, as a man clad in a suit of jet-black armor stepped out in front of me. His face was chiseled and handsome, and if I had to guess, I’d say he was somewhere in his late twenties. It was hard to describe what it was about him, but somehow, he gave off a sort of aura that told me he was no average individual. The man gave me the swiftest of sidelong glances, then went on his way without saying a word.

“Was that man a member of the Maitraw Company?” Rietz asked.

“Yes,” replied Robinson. “That is the current leader of the Maitraw Company, Clamant Maitraw III.”

The Maitraw Company was a band of mercenaries that Couran had taken into his service. They were purported to be the most capable group of sellswords in all of Missian, and I was already regretting missing my chance to appraise their leader. I resolved to give him a closer look the next time I had the chance.

Robinson led us onward through the castle. It was as tall as it was broad in scope, and it seemed Couran was on one of the upper floors. I lost count of how many staircases we climbed and was pretty tired by the time Robinson came to

a stop and gestured at a door.

“You will find Lord Couran inside,” he explained, and I took that as permission to open the door.

“So you’ve arrived, Ars! Good,” said Couran as I stepped inside. “And you’ve brought your retainers, as promised! I have high hopes for their contributions.”

“Thank you,” I replied.

“Hmm—I take it the Malkan is the renowned Rietz?”

“It is an honor to be known by a man of your station, Your Lordship. Rietz Muses, at your service.”

“And I see he’s quite the agreeable one, at that! What of the child next to you, Ars? He looks to be around your age. Is *he* a tactician as well?”

“Yes. In terms of pure potential, he’s the most talented individual I’ve met so far.”

“M-My name is Rosell Kischa... I-It’s a pleasure to meet you, Your Lordship,” Rosell somehow managed to say despite how nervous he was. Couran was the sort of high-ranking noble who exuded an air of authority, so I couldn’t blame him for feeling intimidated.

“Well, I’ll be looking forward to the insights you have to offer,” replied Couran. “And what of the girl? She strikes me as a mage, if I had to hazard a guess.”

“Yes, that’s correct. This is Charlotte Lace, who I brought along to serve as my bodyguard. She’s very capable—we were set upon by bandits several times over the course of our journey, yet she drove off every single one of them.”

“Nice meetin’ you, pops,” said Charlotte. It was such a casual way to greet a

lord of Couran's standing I almost choked.

"Ch-Charlotte!" I gasped. "Have some manners—he's a lord! You're supposed to call him 'Lord Couran' or 'Your Lordship'!"

"Hah!" chuckled Couran. "No need to worry; I am not offended. From the perspective of a young woman like her, I'm sure I'm more than old enough to merit that sort of nickname."

It seemed that he was an understanding enough person to laugh off that sort of casual boorishness, for all the good that did my fraying nerves.

"Lumeire has told me of an incredible mage in your employ—I presume that would be her, yes? And as for the last in your group," said Couran, his gaze turning to Mireille. Instantly, his expression shifted. "Wh-What in the—Mireille?!"

Oh, I guess he knows her, I thought, then realized that it should have been obvious. Mireille was once powerful and esteemed enough among noble circles to be granted her own territory, after all.

Wait a minute...she told me that she was chased out of her position, right?

She'd given me that whole speech about how she'd been set up, sure, but considering what she was like, I knew I could trust that about as far as I could throw it. She'd *definitely* caused some sort of trouble to get herself cast out. There was no way for me to know what she'd done, but it hit me that bringing her here might've been a bad idea.

Of course, if Couran already knew Mireille, then it was safe to assume that he knew how talented she was. It was also safe to assume that he knew she was the sister of one of his enemy's top tacticians. I was certain that, even knowing the risks, he would have the resolve necessary to make use of her knowledge

and tactical prowess.

“So...you’re still alive,” Couran said after a long pause.

“Somehow,” replied Mireille.

“Well, I certainly can’t deny that you, of all people, have the ability to serve as a tactician,” said Couran. “That is not, however, to say I don’t have any reservations regarding this arrangement. How much do you know about this woman’s background, Ars?”

I gave Couran a quick rundown of everything I knew about Mireille, and he nodded.

“Yes, that’s correct. She is indeed the sister of one of my enemy’s tacticians, and she was also a close ally of Vasmarque himself, no less. I can by no means dismiss the possibility that she is a spy.”

“If I can get a word in edgewise,” said Mireille, “Vasmarque and I were never close. He used me, then gave me the boot. I have a grudge against the bastard like you wouldn’t believe.”

That answered one question, or at least started to: it seemed Vasmarque himself was involved in Mireille’s banishment.

“Plus, if I were a spy, why would I throw my lot in with House Louvent? Even I’m shocked that serving a petty little lordling has somehow ended up with me getting to meet you.”

“That is...reasonable, I must admit,” said Couran.

If I were just a petty baron of a tiny territory who had no particular ties to Couran, then it would make no sense for a spy to enter my service. She would’ve gone to Couran himself, or at the very least chosen a more influential lord to use for her purposes.

Couran folded his arms and sank into thought. He seemed to be weighing the costs and benefits of taking Mireille into the fold.

“How long has it been since you hired Mireille as your retainer, Ars?” he eventually asked.

“About a month.”

“And how has her behavior struck you, so far?”

I told him about Mireille’s conduct, sparing very little detail. In other words, I told him about how she’d shirked as much responsibility as possible, drank to excess at all times of the day, and caused so much trouble that she was more or less loathed by almost everyone else under me. The longer I spoke, the more I realized that if she was a spy, she had a funny way of going about her work. Most spies would have been downright desperate to earn the trust of the people they were spying on, yet she seemed to be doing the opposite, if anything.

“That isn’t enough to tell me beyond a shadow of a doubt that she isn’t a spy, but I’ll admit, it does seem unlikely. A problem remains, however: the fact that the other lords in my service will oppose her presence. We’ll have to do something about that,” said Couran after I finished. It seemed that he, at least, had decided that having her around was worth the risk. “In any case, there’s still some time left before the council begins. Until then, please make yourself at home.”

With our conversation over, Couran led us off to a luxurious chamber in another section of the castle. There we would wait for the war council to begin.

A few hours later, we were informed that it was time. The council was to be held in a room they called the Chamber of Debate. A large table was situated in the center of the chamber, and a map was spread out atop it. A fair number of nobles were already inside as well, seated around the table. I recognized most of them from the party I'd attended, but since their retainers hadn't been allowed inside at the time, there were quite a few people present who I'd never seen before.

"Oh, Ars!" a voice rang out. "Couran told me that he'd invited you, but I have to say, I didn't believe it until I saw you walk through the door!"

"Lord Lumeire!" I replied, turning to face him as he walked up to me. I hadn't considered the possibility, but it seemed he'd been invited to the council as well. I also recognized Menas, one of his chief retainers, who was standing behind him.

"I'm impressed that Lord Couran already has you attending his councils. It seems he's taken quite a liking to you! I'm very impressed!"

"I owe it all to you, Lord Lumeire. This is all thanks to you telling Lord Couran about me."

Lumeire paused to consider my words.

"When you put it like that, I suppose I did bring you up a fair share of times, didn't I? So yes, it was my doing! Though, I don't think the tales I told were particularly tall ones. I reported the truth of your exploits, and if Lord Couran took a shine to you as a result, then you have your own efforts to thank for it."

Just as Lumeire finished, a nearby nobleman called out to me.

"You there—you're the boy from the party, aren't you? What are *you* doing

here?" he asked, looking more than a little suspicious.

"I received a personal summons to the council from Lord Couran," I politely replied.

"You? A mere boy? And even if you were a man, House Louvent has not done enough to merit a seat at this table," the nobleman snorted in contempt. He didn't accuse me of anything, but his pointed glare made it clear he suspected I'd earned my invitation through underhanded means.

"What I want to know is who that Malkan he brought with him is! Can't be his retainer, can it?" called out another noble. "Why in the name of decency would anyone bring one of those into these chambers?"

"As a matter of fact, he is my retainer, yes," I replied.

"A Malkan, a retainer? You can't expect me to swallow this drivel without question, can you? Malkans are an inferior breed, and if you think one of them is fit to serve nobility, I have questions about the stock you were raised from! Send him away before his stench starts to linger," the first nobleman said, giving Rietz a look of open disgust.

"Stop right—" began Lumeire, but I held out an arm to interrupt him before he could defend us. I knew that this was a moment where I had to speak up for my people.

"Rietz is an exceptionally capable individual. His mind is as sharp as his blade, and he wields both with expert precision. He has done more for me and my household than any other. More to the point," I continued, dropping into a sharper and less cordial tone, "I hope you recall that you stand within Lord Couran's castle, not your own. It was under his orders that all of us were called to participate in this council. Neither I nor Rietz is under any obligation to bow

to your command.”

That shut him up quick. The nobleman couldn't seem to find the right words to respond with, so he spent a moment just glaring instead.

“Hmph! Stay, then, and prove yourselves to be the worthless fools you are. I shall enjoy the spectacle,” he jabbed, then spun about and stormed off.

“Thank you, Lord Ars,” said Rietz once the man was out of earshot.

“Defending the honor of my retainers is one of my responsibilities as a lord.”

Several people gave him very skeptical looks after that point, but nobody else seemed inclined to speak out against him.

Shortly thereafter, we took our seats around the table. It seemed that quite a large number of people had been summoned to participate in the council. I assumed the idea was that the more people who were present, the more chances there were of formulating a decent plan.

“I thank you all for answering my summons,” said Couran as he stepped into the chamber. “I would like to begin our discussion at once, and I hope to develop an overall strategy for our campaign before we adjourn.”

In other words, Couran intended to plot out the course of the whole war at this very meeting. Without a solid plan to base the movement of our troops around, even if we were to win battles on a local scale, we would have very little hope of claiming victory in the long term.

“Robinson?” said Couran.

“Yes, Milord,” said Robinson, who then spread open a rolled-up sheet of parchment, which he began reading off of. “At present, our forces number one hundred and ten thousand. We have fifty-five thousand infantrymen, thirty thousand archers, twenty thousand cavalymen, and five thousand mages at

our disposal. In regards to the latter, we are capable of providing three thousand small catalyzers, two thousand five hundred medium ones, and five hundred large ones. Our aqua magia reserves come out to an approximate total of fifty-four thousand, one hundred and thirty Ms. Our provisions, meanwhile, can keep our entire force fighting fit for years on end. As for the enemy's forces, while we lack information on the particulars, we are aware they have twenty thousand more men than we do. That said, our men are far better equipped."

The fact that we didn't have clear information about the state of Vasmarque's forces was vexing to me. No sooner than Robinson finished his speech, one of the nobles I wasn't familiar with began to shout.

"I have a plan!" he bellowed. "Our forces are made up of strong men and their morale is high! My armies will dominate any battlefield they are dispatched to! I believe that we should march upon the enemy stronghold, Arcantez, right away! If we mobilize the full might of our combined forces, we will not fail!"

It was clear just by looking at the man that he was more of a fighter than a thinker. In fact, judging by the nature of his plan, I wasn't convinced there was so much as a single thought running through his head at all.

"Your grasp of the situation is shallow," said another noble with glasses. "The odds of us seizing victory with such a barbaric plan are much lower than you give them credit for."

He seemed bright, so I appraised him and found that he had an Intelligence score of 71. The other guy, by the way, had a 41.

"The only way to guarantee victory in battle is to grasp your opponent's weakness," said the man with glasses. "Vasmarque's one fatal flaw is the illegitimacy of his claim. Reason and custom dictate that the eldest son, Lord

Couran, inherit his father's household, and while Vasmarque was at one point slated to inherit the position instead, those plans were discarded. He may claim that the duke only rescinded the nomination out of respect for Lord Couran's objection and that the duke intended to reinstate him as his successor in due time, but without the duke himself around to attest one way or the other, such claims are unsubstantiated."

The man in glasses wasn't done yet. He carried on, eloquently conveying his thoughts.

"Vasmarque is a capable schemer, and I'm sure he has coaxed many of our fellow lords into backing his cause, but what of the people? Do you not believe that the citizens of Arcantez question his rule? I believe that if the people of Arcantez were to denounce Vasmarque and accept Lord Couran as their true and just ruler, the war would be all but won."

Now we're getting somewhere!

That seemed like a reasonable strategy, as far as I could tell. Sure, he hadn't proposed any specific methods for turning the people of Arcantez against Vasmarque, but this was a general strategy meeting, and that fell more within the realm of tactics.

"It seems your information is somewhat lacking, Mark," said Couran. Mark, incidentally, was the name of the bespectacled lord. "Our foe is talented at rallying the people to his cause. In the time I have spent building up Semplar into Missian's capital of trade and commerce, Vasmarque has gained the backing of citizens in cities throughout the duchy. The people of Arcantez are loyal to him, to the extent that earning their trust after he is defeated will pose a problem in its own right. So long as Vasmarque lives, gaining the support of Arcantez's population will be all but impossible."

“I-Is that so?” replied Mark, the color draining from his face. “My deepest apologies, Milord.”

“No need to apologize. I shall not fault anyone for expressing their opinion.”

The atmosphere around the table remained heavy. The room fell into silence, and for quite some time, nobody dared to be the next to propose a plan.

“U-Umm, m-may I say something?” asked Rosell in a trembling voice, breaking the long silence.

The gazes of all the nobles present fell upon him. Whispers began to circulate, most of them along the lines of, “That child has something to contribute?”

Rosell flinched back, terrified, but then he took a deep breath and seemed to calm down. Then, he began to speak.

“It, umm, seems like everyone’s assuming we have to claim Arcantez, but I believe the enemy will have the city well-fortified, and Castle Arcantez is the sturdiest and most defensible stronghold in all of Missian. Conquering the city would prove difficult, and so, I think we should instead focus our efforts on the next largest city under their influence, Velshdt.”

“Velshdt? What will conquering Velshdt gain us?” asked a nobleman. “We’ll never win this war unless we take Arcantez!”

“It’s true that taking Velshdt won’t guarantee our victory, but it will bring us much closer to that objective. I’m sure all of you understand the strategic importance that Velshdt holds, right?”

At that, the assembled lords fell into thought. Rosell was proposing that if they couldn’t claim the enemy’s capital, they should start small and claim the surrounding regions first. If Velshdt were to fall, then it would expose Vasmarque’s weakness and raise the odds of the lords serving under him

deciding to stab him in the back. As far as I could tell, it wasn't a bad plan at all.

"Unlike Arcantez, I do not believe the people of Velshdt hold Vasmarque in high esteem," said Couran in a thoughtful tone. "In the worst case, claiming Arcantez by force could result in its citizens rising against us. Claiming Velshdt, however, would pose no such risk. Moreover, the castle in Velshdt is one of the oldest and most decrepit in all of Missian. I'd bet it hasn't been fortified to withstand modern war magic, and that would make it all but impossible to defend... A sound plan, indeed."

"The enemy will expect us to advance upon Arcantez," said Rosell. "I propose that we do so, to start, but then divert the bulk of our forces to Velshdt, leaving a small force on the path to Arcantez to draw out their army. If all goes well, we could claim the city with ease."

Not only had Rosell's suggestion been approved by the commanding lord, but he'd even proposed a specific method to go about carrying it out. It was obvious that nobody was happy to have to take a child's suggestion, and some of them were trying to come up with counter-arguments, but nobody seemed able to think up anything good enough.

"May I offer a suggestion as well?" asked Rietz. This time, the lords' scornful gazes turned upon him.

"Please speak, Sir Rietz," said Robinson, granting him formal permission to offer his viewpoint. With the word of Couran's right-hand man backing him up, none of the assembled nobles had any hope of silencing him.

"I believe Rosell's suggestion that we conquer Velshdt is sound. However, I do not believe that a feint is our best option. Not only is there a chance that the enemy will catch on and send troops to reinforce Velshdt, but the even greater danger is that they will instead send their forces here, to Semplar. If Semplar

were to fall, we would find ourselves fighting at an overwhelming disadvantage. We would have to call our troops to its defense if we learned the enemy intended to strike here, which would render our surprise attack on Velshdt moot.”

“Good point,” said Rosell, nodding all the while. Rietz had indeed picked out a flaw in his plan. “That means we would either have to leave part of our forces in Semplar to guard the city or send more troops off to make the diversion more convincing.”

“If we thin out our troops, conquering Velshdt may prove difficult,” countered Rietz.

“True, but think about it this way: if the enemy’s main force in Arcantez is drawn out to attack Semplar, that means they’ll be fighting on our terms! It’s easier to set traps when you’re fighting in your own territory, for one thing. We’d be at an obvious advantage! In the best-case scenario, we may even be able to surround the enemy’s main force and wipe them out in one fell swoop!”

“That does make sense,” I said. I was indeed under the impression that as long as you were aware that the enemy would be advancing on your territory, fighting on home turf gave you the upper hand. Would that be enough to turn the tide in our favor, though? Vasmarque was known to have several talented tacticians on his side, and provoking him into attacking Semplar seemed pretty risky.

“What do you think about all this, Mireille?” I asked, turning to the third member of my party.

“I think Rosell’s got the right idea when it comes to attacking Velshdt first,” replied Mireille, who looked like she’d been about to nod off before I called on her. “I’ve seen Castle Arcantez up close and personal, and I can tell you that it

won't be easy to bring it down. The rest of the plan, though? I'd toss that out. Vasmarque and his people aren't suckers, so there's no way we'd fool them with such cheap tricks. I doubt they'd bother attacking Semplar at all."

Now that Mireille had the room's attention, the nobles began to whisper amongst themselves.

"W-Wait a moment...I've seen her somewhere before."

"He called her Mireille, didn't he?"

"Surely not that Mireille?!"

Apparently, most of them already knew of her.

Guess I should've expected that, since she used to be a baroness and all.

"What an *honor* that I'd be remembered by such esteemed guests."

"Lord Couran!" a nobleman shouted. "Do you know who that woman is?! She was driven out from her place of authority for a very good reason!"

"And her brother is Vasmarque's closest ally!" another yelled. "She could be a spy!"

"Hold!" shouted Couran. "I know who she is, and I was already aware that she was in attendance. Her skill is unquestionable, and I have deemed it unlikely that she is a spy. As such, I have chosen to trust her."

Once again, none present could bring themselves to defy their direct superior's orders. Mireille was free to speak once more.

"More than anything else, Vasmarque moves with caution. He anticipates every possible development and plans how to deal with each and every one of them in advance. I doubt we can out-plot him."

"I believe I know better than anyone how clever the man is," replied Couran.

“But what, then, do you propose we do to overcome him?”

“I have a few plans in mind that he’d have a hard time dealing with, even if he does see them coming. First of all, the territory that Vasmarque governs shares its north-western border with the Duchy of Paradille. We could enlist their support.”

“Wait,” said Couran. “The Duke of Paradille has long despised my father, and as his children, we’ve inherited that distaste. I cannot imagine he would ally himself with Vasmarque, but by the same token, I do not believe he would offer me aid.”

“True, but the Duke of Paradille’s also part of a dying breed: he considers himself an oathbound servant of the Imperial House. If we could convince them to serve as an intermediary, the odds are high that we’d be able to get Paradille on our side. These days, the Imperial House is starved for coin, so with the wealth you wield, enlisting their aid shouldn’t be hard at all.”



“Asking the Imperial House to serve as our intermediary... I see. I do not claim to like the idea, but it may well be our best option. Moreover, Vasmarque does not have the sort of funding to his name that I do. It is a card that he would be incapable of playing.”

Couran seemed to be considering putting Mireille’s plan into action.

“Very well, then,” declared Couran. “Allow me to summarize the plan as it stands. Although our ultimate goal remains the conquest of Arcantez, we will disregard it and instead endeavor to claim Velshdt first. Furthermore, we will do so by enlisting the aid of Paradille to bolster our numbers.”

With that, the broad strokes of the plan were settled. That meant it was time to focus on the nitty-gritty little tactical details: when to appeal to the Imperial House for aid, who to send on that mission, how much money to have ready for the bribe, and so on and so forth. Everyone agreed that sending our emissary right away was the best course of action, but it would still have to wait until a variety of preparations were complete.

It went without saying that Couran wouldn’t dream of having anyone less than exceptional conduct negotiations with the Imperial House. However, with matters in Missian as they stood, handling the matter himself wasn’t feasible. Thus, it was decided that Couran’s first-born son would be entrusted with the task, with Robinson going along as his assistant.

I happened to notice that Couran looked more than a little apprehensive when he nominated his son for the task. I’d never met the son in question, but I didn’t get the impression Couran believed he was all that capable. Couran claimed that everything would work out as long as he had Robinson there to advise him, though it sort of sounded like he was talking to himself when he said that just as much as he was talking to the rest of us.

As for the money, an astonishing sum of several tens of thousands of gold coins was readied—and that was just the advance payment. A boat was to be readied to transport it. The Imperial Capital, like Semplar, was located by the coast, so traveling by sea was the quickest option. The ships at Couran's disposal were cutting-edge by the standards of this world's technology, and he had both a skilled navigator and a talented marine pilot under his employ, so the chances of the vessel sinking en route were next to none.

A few plans were also hashed out for what to do if the negotiations went awry. We still wouldn't be trying to outwit our foe, though. Instead, we'd be shoring up our defenses and mounting a more direct invasion of Velshdt at the same time, attempting to gain the upper hand by way of pure tactics. In short: the idea was to keep plan B simple and straightforward.

And with that, our immediate plans were laid and the conference came to an end. The assembled lords began to leave the Chamber of Debate one by one. I, however, remained seated on account of Couran having ended the meeting with the words: "Ars! I would like you to stay for a moment." His choice of phrasing seemed to convey he wanted me and me alone to stay, and the other lords took the hint, so it wasn't long before I was left alone with him and Robinson in the chamber.

"You have held up your end of our bargain well, Ars. The tacticians you brought are exceptional indeed, and you have my thanks," said Couran.

"I'm honored by your words, Milord."

"Of course, I could take issue with your choice to bring Mireille, of all the people, but considering the circumstances, I'll refrain from nitpicking," he added with a smile. "Now then, to business. I have another favor I would like to ask of you."

It seemed that thanking me was the preamble—Couran had asked me to remain behind because he wanted me to do something for him once again.

“As you are aware, I have already selected an individual to negotiate with the Imperial House. However, I have my apprehensions about sending Rengue and Robinson alone to handle the task. Are you familiar with anyone who would do well as an assistant in such negotiations?”

Rengue, of course, was the name of Couran’s son. I knew that Robinson’s Politics score was quite high already, but it seemed Couran was still unconvinced that his help alone would be enough. Either Couran was extremely cautious, or Rengue was just that unreliable.

“Rietz would be the most politically adept of my retainers,” I replied without hesitation.

“Rietz, is it...?” said Couran with a frown. “That would pose difficulties. The Imperial Capital and the surrounding regions are among the most prejudiced in all the empire when it comes to the Malkan people. I would be disinclined to send him, for his own sake.”

“Oh. I didn’t know.”

Okay, so the next highest Politics score would be... But who would that be? Rosell? No, even if his score is the highest, this is way too heavy of a task for him. Mireille and Charlotte are out of the running as well, so I guess I don’t have any retainers suited for the task.

Or so I thought, but then, at the last second, I remembered Licia.

Wait, that’s right! She has a high Politics score! Maybe she’d be able to help!

The problem, of course, was that she was my fiancée, not my retainer. She wasn’t even a part of my household yet, so giving her such a task seemed like a

tall order...but I decided to let Couran know about her anyway, just for good measure.

“Your fiancée, you say? Hmm... I am less than inclined to coerce a girl such as her into going out on this sort of journey. Nevertheless, if you speak with her and her father and receive their consent, I would like you to bring her to see me.”

“Understood,” I replied. Just talking with Licia and her family sounded easy enough.

With that, Couran’s business with me was finished. We spent the night in the castle, then departed for Lamberg.

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Arriving back at my estate and then immediately setting out to visit Licia at her home would have been rude, so instead, I decided to send her a letter expressing my desire to visit first. Essentially, I wrote that I had important matters to discuss with her regarding the war and that she didn’t need to bother preparing to welcome us as formal guests.

Well, I sent the letter to her father, Hammond, not to Licia herself. I had a feeling that he’d be opposed to the idea of sending her to the capital, so I knew I was going to have to have a discussion with him before long. Of course, I had a hard time imagining that Couran would judge him for turning down that sort of request, so I didn’t think it would be a disaster even if he dug his feet in. I wasn’t certain how helpful Licia would be in the negotiations, anyway, so I wasn’t planning on insisting.

Before I received a reply, one of my retainers came to report to me on an altogether different matter.

“I bring a report from Ben of the Shadows, Lord Ars.”

I’d known that I’d be out for some time on account of my trip to Semplar, and wouldn’t be able to receive any reports from Ben in person. And so, I’d left one of my retainers with instructions to retrieve his report and hand over the gold in my place. It seemed that had worked out as intended.

“Good work,” I replied, then opened up the report and began to read.

To begin with, it informed me that the Shadows had begun developing channels of information that would let them learn about our enemies. The report said nothing about how they were doing that, but I wasn’t going to fuss over the little details. Anyway, it went on to say that as time passed, Vasmarque was becoming more and more convinced that his occupation of Castle Arcantez gave him the upper hand in the war. As such, he would not choose to sally forth and strike the first blow at present. That was only true for the time being, though, as one of Vasmarque’s advisors had started insisting that an invasion of Perreina was their best move. Talks on the subject were still ongoing, but they were growing rather heated.

Next, the report explained that Vasmarque was attempting to forge an alliance with the Duchy of Seitz. The plan, it seemed, was to convince Seitz’s leadership to carry out an attack on Couran’s domain. Discussions with Seitz had yet to bear fruit, but it seemed they had expressed a certain degree of interest, so I couldn’t rule their alliance out. They had also tried to conduct under-the-table negotiations with both the Duchy of Paradille and the Imperial House, but both of those attempts had fallen through. Vasmarque had anticipated that Couran might attempt to ally himself with Paradille, but had

written the plan off as a flight of fancy.

That concluded all the new information the Shadows had for me. The letter ended with a note that all of it had come from a single source—one of Vasmarque's retainers—so they couldn't guarantee it was a hundred percent reliable. Still, I was impressed that they'd managed to amass that much information about the enemies' strategies in such a short time.

Looks like the Shadows live up to their reputation! Good thing I went to the effort of hiring them.

I knew that if Vasmarque and Seitz worked out an alliance, things would get very nasty, especially here in Canarre. Since our county was on the border with Seitz, it seemed safe to assume that we would suffer the most damage if the duchy threw itself into the war. Needless to say, that included Lamberg—there was no chance my barony would escape unscathed.

I decided to report the Shadows' findings to Couran. I had a feeling that he had some sort of spy network of his own, and he might have already found all of this out himself, but just to be safe, it seemed like a good idea to let him know. I wrote down all the pertinent information in a letter, then sent it off right away.

A few days later, a letter arrived from Hammond granting me permission to visit him and his daughter. I wasted no time in calling together an escort and setting out for Torbequista and the Pleide family's estate.

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Torbequista, the barony that House Pleide ruled over, was located in the

County of Canarre, so it wasn't a far trip from Lamberg. If we kept a rapid pace, the whole journey would take less than a day. I set out first thing in the morning with Rietz and the others as my escort, and after urging our horses on for the better part of the day, we arrived in the evening.

"It's wonderful to see you, Lord Ars!" exclaimed Licia, who was waiting to greet us upon our arrival. "It feels like it's been so long since we last met!"

The last time we'd met, as far as I could remember, was about two months ago.

I guess that counts as a long time...

It wasn't long enough for her to look any different, though she did have a rather extravagant dress on. It seemed she'd dressed up for the occasion.

"It's good to see you too," I replied.

Licia went around to greet Rietz and the rest of my escort, then turned back to me.

"Now then, allow me to lead you into the estate."

House Pleide's estate struck me as just a little older than my own, at least judging by its appearance. The grounds were full of flowers, which I assumed Licia had grown herself. It was the tenth day of the second month, which meant it was fall. Once the cold of winter set in, the majority of the flowers would die off, but it was still early enough in the season for quite a wide variety of them to be in full bloom.

We proceeded into the estate's main building, the interior of which reminded me of House Louvent's. Licia led us to a parlor where we found Hammond waiting for us.

"It's wonderful to see you, Ars! Welcome to our abode," said Hammond with

a smile.

“It’s a pleasure to see you as well, Lord Hammond,” I replied. “Thank you for allowing us to visit you today.”

“Oh, think nothing of it! I’ve been hoping to speak with you as well, as it so happens. Come, come—have a seat!”

I sat down, and Licia took a seat in a chair beside her father.

“I do hope you’ll pardon us for being so ill-prepared to host you. I know you were gracious enough to write that we needn’t bother, but I only refrained because such joviality seemed less than suitable for talks of war.”

“No need to apologize,” I replied. “I’m grateful enough that you were willing to hear me out.”

“And on that subject, let us proceed to the matter at hand! You wrote that Licia would have to be present for our discussion as well, yes? What, may I ask, is your business with us today?”

I explained that Couran would soon be conducting negotiations with the Imperial House and the Duke of Paradille, that he was looking for assistants to aid in the negotiations, and that I had proposed Licia as a potential candidate. Licia’s and Hammond’s eyes widened when I delivered that last piece of news. They seemed shocked.

“You want *Licia* to play such an important role?” Hammond asked. “And are we to interpret this as an order from Lord Couran?”

“No, not an order. As things stand, I’ve merely proposed Licia as a candidate for the task. Lord Couran informed me that he has no intention of forcing her to accept the role, and specified that he would need consent from both of you before anything concrete is decided.”

“Is that so...?” murmured Hammond. “But would Licia even be capable of serving as a negotiator’s aide? She’s but a girl of thirteen, and has very little practical experience with such matters...not to mention the fact that a journey that long is liable to be fraught with danger.”

As expected, Hammond seemed reluctant to give his permission. Thus, I decided to make an effort to talk him into it.

“I have full faith in Licia’s abilities. I believe that she has an exceptional talent for this sort of negotiation—more than enough to carry out this task. In regard to the dangers, Lord Couran’s own son will be serving as the chief negotiator, so you can rest assured that their party will be well-guarded.”

Licia’s current Politics score was sitting at 89 points. She was still a single point shy of an even 90, but that was still plenty high for her to be helpful.

“Hmm... I’m Licia’s father, so I am aware of her talents. And if her guard will be that reliable, then perhaps... Yes, this may well be a learning opportunity for her... I would not be opposed to such a venture,” said Hammond. I’d managed to change his mind without too much trouble, it seemed. “What about you, Licia? What are your thoughts on the matter?”

Licia’s opinion was the sole remaining obstacle. If she agreed, I’d be able to move my suggestion forward with Couran. She spent a moment in thought, then said, “I would be willing to go, under two conditions. First, I would ask that Lord Ars accompany us on our voyage. Even with Lord Couran’s soldiers present, I would not feel safe with an escort of strangers. If Lord Ars was there, though, I would be able to rest easy.”

“Huh? Wait, me? But I have no talent for combat, and I’m not even fully grown! I’m as weak as they come! There must be someone among House Pleide’s retainers who would be a better fit for the role...”

“If you’re by my side, Lord Ars, I will be able to rest easy,” repeated Licia with a smile and a firm tone that told me she would brook no argument.

“I-I see...” I replied, for lack of a better option.

“As for my second condition... After the war is over, I would have you marry me.”

An identical look of bewilderment crossed the faces of everyone present.

“W-Wait a moment, Licia,” said Hammond. “Don’t you think it’s a little too soon for you to be thinking about marriage? Y-You are engaged to Ars, yes, but that doesn’t mean—”

“I imagine the war will carry on for about two years or so,” replied Licia. “By that point, I will be fifteen and Lord Ars will be fourteen. I would hardly call that too soon, Father!”

By Japanese standards, it was, but in this world, a marriage at the age of fourteen wasn’t anything out of the ordinary—not that you’d know it from Hammond’s reaction to Licia’s proposal. I, on the other hand, was worried about something different: promising someone you’d marry her once the war ended felt like the start of my tragic end.

That ominous bit of foreshadowing aside, I wasn’t opposed to the marriage itself. I mean, we were already engaged, so our marriage was already a matter of when, not if. My perception of Licia had changed quite a bit since I’d first met her, and I was a lot less apprehensive on that front than I used to be. From my perspective, there were nothing but upsides to marrying her, so it felt a little weird for that to be used as a condition on her part. I had to wonder if Licia had some reason why she wanted to speed our marriage along.

The main problem was that she wanted me to go to the capital with her. That

would mean I'd have to leave Lamberg unattended for a lengthy period of time. Would everything be all right while I was gone?

"What do you think, Rietz? Should I go with them?" I whispered.

"Let me think... Your absence would indeed cause a fair share of inconveniences, but if you succeed in your task, you may well gain Lord Couran's trust to an even greater degree. Moreover, I believe visiting the capital and Paradille will be a very good experience. You might even find someone talented to bring into your employ... So yes, I believe it would be in your best interests to accept."

"Hmm..."

It occurred to me that as long as I left Rietz behind to manage things, I wouldn't have to worry about anything going wrong back at my estate. And, as Rietz himself told me, I stood to gain quite a lot from taking on the task.

"Very well, then," I said, looking back to Licia. "I accept your terms."

"Wonderful! You have my thanks, Lord Ars," Licia replied with a smile. "In that case, I too shall accept your offer and agree to serve as an advisor for the negotiations."

"And I will not object," added Hammond, who still seemed a little reluctant when it came to the matter of marriage. Seeing as he was her father, I couldn't blame him.

In any case, I now had my master negotiator. Licia and I would be traveling together.

I needed to make plenty of preparations before I set out for the capital, so for the moment, I returned to Lamberg. Licia had her fair share of things to do as well, it seemed, and since Lamberg was closer to Torbequista than Semplar, we decided that she would first stop by my estate, after which the two of us would travel together.

Thus, preparing for the trip to Semplar had to come before anything else. I was planning on stocking up on the supplies I'd need for the capital leg once I arrived there—after all, if I brought along everything I'd need to get to the capital, I'd have way too much luggage to handle.

I also had to decide who I'd take with me. It went without saying that I would need a guard to escort me to Semplar, and although Couran's guards would be watching over me from there to the capital, I still wanted somebody around who I knew I could trust. That was especially true because I realized Couran's guards would prioritize his son's safety over mine in the event of an emergency. I needed someone who could protect me and Licia if we ended up getting the short end of the stick.

I figured asking Charlotte to tag along was a good call. Since the central Empire was extra prejudiced against Malkans, I couldn't bring Rietz, so I decided to leave him in charge of my estate instead. That left me with few retainers with high Valor scores. The next most attractive candidate was Mireille, but there was no telling what sort of trouble she'd cause if I brought her, so I decided against it.

Of course, there's also no telling what sort of trouble she'll get up to at the estate while I'm gone, but I'm sure Rietz will be able to keep her in line.

Rosell's brothers had pretty decent Valor scores, so I decided to take them

instead.

Next, I wrote a letter to Couran informing him that Licia had accepted the task under the condition that I go with her. I knew that it would take quite some time for a reply to arrive, so I wasn't planning to wait to hear from him before I departed. I just had to hope he wouldn't object to the idea of me making the journey, since that would throw a real wrench into the works. I kept telling myself that Couran's boat would be huge and that it would be just fine, but I knew deep down that there was a chance he'd reject the plan. In the worst case, I was prepared to attempt some desperate last-minute negotiations.

A few days later, Licia arrived at my estate by horse-drawn carriage with an escort of maids and soldiers. I didn't know when we were supposed to set sail, so my goal was to get to Semplar as fast as humanly possible, and we ended up setting out pretty much right after Licia arrived.

"Well, I'm off," I said to Rietz.

"Safe travels to you! Know that your estate will be in good hands until you return," replied Rietz, looking pretty glum about the idea of being left behind.

"What, not bringing me along? Bah—and I was gonna sample all the booze the capital had to offer! They get stuff in from all across Summerforth!" grumbled Mireille.

"I think the trip would be a lot more fun with Miss Mireille along for the ride," Charlotte added, a hint of hope in her voice.

"We're not going on vacation, people," I sighed. "And besides, there's plenty of booze for you here in Lamberg."

Mireille clicked her tongue in frustration.

"Drat! Figures it wouldn't work."

“Lord Ars is just too stubborn,” said Charlotte.

This wasn’t the first time Mireille had tried to talk her way into the trip, and I’d turned her down on every attempt. I had a bad feeling that a drunk Mireille plus Charlotte would be a disastrous combination, and I did not want our faces ending up on wanted posters after we blew away half of the capital with magic.

“What’re the capital and Paradille like, anyway?” asked Rosell. “Be sure to bring back some souvenirs, Ars!”

“I just said we’re not going on a vacation...but yes, I’m sure I can bring something back for you.”

Rosell was a real bookworm, so I figured I’d look for some sort of rare tome that he’d appreciate.

“Well then,” said Rietz, “I shall be praying for your safe return and success in your endeavors, Lord Ars. You as well, Charlotte.”

“Thanks. I’ll be back before you know it,” I replied.

“Later!” shouted Charlotte.

And so, we set off from my estate, climbing aboard a carriage and making our way to Semplar with Licia.

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Once again, we were set upon by bandits a few times on the road to Semplar. Once again, Charlotte drove them away with her magic without breaking a sweat.

“You’re incredible, Lady Charlotte!” gushed Licia after one particular incident,

her eyes sparkling with admiration.

“Meh, it’s not that impressive. Taking out a few bandits is a given for someone as skilled as I am,” said Charlotte. She practically exuded smugness from every pore.

I swear, you give that girl even a hint of praise and it goes straight to her head, I thought, giving her a chilly glare. But then, I let out a reflexive shout as something jolted the carriage out of nowhere. Not just once, either—it kept bumping and swaying around as we carried along. It seemed we’d reached a road that was less than well-maintained. The shaking was so intense that I ended up falling over and catching onto Charlotte’s shoulder to support myself.

“Whoa, there! Bumpy ride, huh? I’ll keep you nice and safe, Lord Ars!” said Charlotte, who then proceeded to wrap her arms around me and pull me right into her chest. I felt my face press into something soft...and was distracted by her distinctive scent. I’d lived for thirty-five years in my previous incarnation without ever so much as touching a woman, so I wasn’t used to this sort of thing. In short: I had no idea what to do with myself.

“H-Hey, Charlotte!”

“You’ve grown a little, huh, Lord Ars? Surprised you’re this heavy,” said Charlotte, ignoring my protests. It felt like she was treating me like her little brother or something.

In the end, Charlotte kept holding me until we made it onto a more well-maintained road, where she released me. I reeled back and clutched at my pounding heart, then happened to glance over at Licia, who appeared to be smiling. I said “appeared to be” because for some reason, the smile on her face terrified me. It was hard to explain, but there was an intensity to her expression that I didn’t want directed at me.

“Lord Ars?” said Licia.

“Y-Yes?”

“I trust that Lady Charlotte’s bosom made for a comfortable cushion?” Licia asked. Her smile didn’t slip for a second, but her voice came out in an unusual and frightening monotone.

She’s gotta be mad, right? I mean, she is my fiancée, and Charlotte might be one of my retainers, but she’s also a girl! Sure, she was just keeping me upright, but she didn’t have to hug me that close. If Licia’s angry, I can’t blame her at all!

“N-No, it’s not what you th—” I began, hoping to explain myself, only to be cut off by Charlotte herself.

“Oh, right! I guess Lord Ars is a boy,” she said. “I was wondering why his heart was pounding up a storm. But hey, all boys love big breasts. You can’t blame him for it.”

Licia’s smile spasmed.



Oh, god. She's mad. She was mad before, and she's frothing mad after that comment.

There was no explaining my way out of the situation anymore, so I decided to just clam up and drown in my own cold sweat. Licia, meanwhile, just stared at me, unblinking, her smile never budging. I spent longer than I liked feeling like I was sitting on a bed of nails before she looked away and I could breathe a sigh of relief.

At that point, Licia scooted over to whisper in Charlotte's ear. Just when I was wondering what she could be asking, Charlotte spoke up.

"Huh? How to make yours as big as mine? Just eat a lot—that's all I did," she said, out loud, ruining Licia's efforts to ask the question surreptitiously. Licia flew into a blushing panic and shushed her, but the damage was done. I'd never seen Licia freak out like that before, though considering the subject matter at hand, I couldn't blame her.

Unfortunately for Licia, Charlotte either didn't understand her gesture or otherwise didn't care, and just kept on talking without a hint of restraint.

"Y'know, I wasn't that big myself before I moved to the estate, but I started eating way better once I got there. I think you might just be underfed, Licia."

Uh, no. I'm pretty sure you just happened to hit your growth spurt around the time I hired you.

On the other hand, it was possible that she wouldn't have grown as much if she'd suffered malnutrition throughout said growth spurt, so she wasn't all wrong.

At that point, Licia glanced over at me. I did my best to look away and pretend I wasn't listening, but it occurred to me that I wasn't a great actor and that

overplaying my lack of reaction just made it more obvious that I'd heard everything.

Whoops.

Licia let out a long, heavy sigh.

"You and Lord Ars are each hard to handle in your own right," she muttered, her shoulders slumping with weariness.

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We made it to Semplar unscathed. Licia seemed moved as she stared out at the city streets.

"So this is Semplar," she marveled. "I've never been so far from my homeland... I've heard tales of the ocean, but it was hard to believe that such a vast body of water existed."

"We're about to ride a ship over it to get to the capital, so you'll have plenty of time to appreciate it," I noted.

"Just the thought of it is exciting!"

I'd been sort of worried that she'd find a journey of this length nerve-racking, but it seemed those concerns had been groundless.

Our next destination was Castle Semplar, where we brought Licia to meet with Couran.

"I take it you are Licia?" he asked. His voice sounded a little lower than usual, and that tone gave him a very intimidating air. "I am Couran Salemakhia."

“A pleasure to meet you,” Licia replied without missing a beat. “My name is Licia Pleide. I have heard many tales of your exploits and achievements, Lord Couran.”

Couran gave Licia a long, appraising glance, and then his expression softened.

“Hmm. Most girls I meet are so scared of me that they can hardly speak a word. I can see your nerves are made of stronger stuff than the average lass’s.”

Oh, was he testing her? I wondered. It made a certain amount of sense—if that was enough to leave Licia shaken, then she wouldn’t be ready for a mission of this magnitude. I had absolute faith in my power’s assessment of Licia, of course, but I could understand his desire to give her a quick test himself.

“Now then, I’ve read your letter, but for the sake of certainty, I must hear it from your lips. Do you mean to travel with the negotiators, Ars?” asked Couran, seeking my confirmation.

“Yes, on Lady Licia’s request.”

“Then I see no need to object. You are welcome to accompany the party.”

“Thank you.”

I felt more than a little relieved that he’d granted me permission.

“In fact, I find that plan the opposite of objectionable,” Couran continued. “I’m pleased to hear that you will be a part of this venture.”

“Are you saying you want me to look for more talented personnel in the capital?” I asked.

“No, not at all... Tell me, Ars—does your power allow you to perceive your own talents?”

“No, it doesn’t. I’m the only person it doesn’t work on.”

“I see. Then it may come as news to you that you have a gift for politics—or at least, you do in my eyes. I believe it’s quite possible that you, yourself, will play an important role in the negotiations.”

“D-Do you?”

A gift for politics? Me?

I’d more or less surmised that my Valor and Intelligence were less than exceptional, but I had yet to pin down my Leadership or Politics scores, even in a broad sense. I knew I wasn’t talentless, but I also never saw any particular reason to describe myself as talented. Frankly, I couldn’t think of any instance in which I’d demonstrated any sort of talent to Couran, and I was unsure where he’d gotten the idea that I had any into his head. Maybe it was just instinct? I didn’t believe I was talented, in any case, but I didn’t see anything wrong with indulging in the fantasy every once in a while.

“It will take about another week to prepare for the voyage. And, oh—it so happens that my son is visiting the castle today. I’ll introduce you to him now,” Couran said before he sent out one of his retainers to summon his son.

A short while later, the door to the room opened once more.

“You called for me, Father?” said a tall, blond-haired man. He stepped inside, along with a red-haired girl who looked about ten or so.

The boy was Couran’s son, Rengue. I could see the resemblance—even if I hadn’t been told he was Couran’s offspring, I would’ve known they were related at first glance.

Who’s the girl, though? She’s cute, yeah, but that’s about all I can...hmm?

Looking a little closer, I realized that she was wearing a style of clothing more common to boys.

Are they a boy, then? But it's odd for a boy to have hair as long as theirs...and they're cute enough that I can't see them as anything other than a girl!

I decided to just appraise the two of them. First off, I took a look at Rengue.

Rengue Salemakhia

Age: 20

Male

Status:

LEA: 44/79

VAL: 50/78

INT: 40/66

POL: 31/91

Ambition: 90

Aptitudes:

Infantry: C

Cavalry: B

Archer: C

Mage: D

Fortification: D

Weaponry: D

Naval: C

Aerial: B

Strategy: B

He turned out to be more or less what I'd expected. His maximum scores were rather high, but his current scores were low. For a man of twenty to have that big of a gap between his current state and his potential, I had to assume that he was either a lazy bum or just a late bloomer.

Next, I appraised the child.

Teknado Salemakhia

Age: 10

Male

Status:

LEA: 44/61

VAL: 48/65

INT: 48/70

POL: 33/65

Ambition: 18

Aptitudes:

Infantry: C

Cavalry: C

Archer: C

Mage: C

Fortification: C

Weaponry: C

Naval: C

Aerial: C

Strategy: C

His stats ended up being just a little above average. He struck me as a jack of all trades, master of none. He was also another Salemakhia, so I had to wonder if he was Couran's son as well.

"This is my first son, Rengue, and my third son, Teknado," said Couran. "I intended to send Rengue on his own at first, but Teknado insisted on accompanying him. I believe that getting out of Semplar and seeing the world will be a valuable experience for him, so I granted him permission to do so."

So he is Couran's son, then. He'll be joining us, huh? Guess he wants to let his

kids leave the nest.

“Um, Father? Who are these people?” asked Rengue.

“They shall be accompanying you on your journey,” explained Couran. “Their names are Ars Louvent and Licia Pleide.”

I bowed and Licia curtsied as he introduced us.

“Huh?” Rengue blinked. “But they’re just children, aren’t they? Isn’t it too dangerous to send kids out on a trip like this? I don’t think this is a good idea.”

“Is that your way of saying that I shouldn’t be going with you, Rengue?” asked Teknado.

“It is, yes. You shouldn’t come either,” Rengue answered in the bluntest manner possible.

“I appreciate your concern, but I’ve already received our father’s permission, so I will be going with you,” countered Teknado.

“Rest assured that your guard will be more than sufficient to protect you,” added Couran. “More to the point, Teknado’s skill with a blade is hardly lacking, even compared to your own.”

Judging by their respective Valor scores, I didn’t think he was kidding. Though to be fair, Rengue at least had a higher maximum score.

“I-I’ll prove my worth on the battlefield when the time comes!” stammered Rengue.

Couran just gave him a long, hard look, then sighed. I didn’t have a full grasp of his personality yet, but that exchange gave me the feeling that Rengue was a bit of a problem child.

“Well, if Father says it’s all right, I won’t press the matter. But that said,

umm...Arms and Lillia, was it?"

Oh god, he's forgotten our names already.

I re-introduced myself as Ars, then Licia reminded him of her name as well.

"Y-Yes, of course. Ars and Licia, you should know that this mission will mark the first of many grand achievements that I shall, um, achieve over my lifetime. A child or two perishing en route would spoil the story, so if you're intent upon following me, I'm going to have to ask that you don't wander off and die somewhere," said Rengue with an air of pompous superiority. Apparently, the man had quite a high opinion of himself.

"That takes care of today's introductions. The two of you may go on your way."

"Yes, Father," Rengue and Teknado replied, then left the room.

Couran turned to me once more and asked, "Ars...did you appraise Rengue?"

"I did," I replied with a nod.

"Then I imagine you're aware of his lack of ability, and you may have also surmised that in spite of that inadequacy, he has the utmost faith in himself and makes no effort whatsoever toward self-improvement. I can only assume I was unprepared to raise a child—even now, I fear I lack the knack for it... At least Teknado has turned out diligent in comparison," Couran sighed. He seemed troubled by his son's flaws.

"It's true that Rengue's abilities are underdeveloped, at the moment," I replied. "But you should know that he has remarkable potential."

Most of his ability caps were in the seventies or above, while his maximum Politics score was an impressive 91.

If he put some effort in, he could become an extraordinary person.

“Truly?” asked Couran. “I do recall you mentioning that your power allows you to perceive one’s latent abilities...”

“That’s correct, and yes, I’m certain.”

“Hmm. I see... Still, none of that matters until he puts in the requisite effort. If only something would make him want to try for once in his life.”

It was remarkable—when Couran started fretting about his children, he stopped looking like a lord and started looking like an ordinary father. I’d never had any children in either of my lifetimes, so I couldn’t relate to him.

“That’s enough of this topic for now,” Couran said. “But ah, yes—I do have one more thing I wish to discuss before you leave. It concerns your letter.”

I assumed he was talking about the letter I’d written to him based on the Shadows’ report.

I’m glad it made it to him.

“I don’t know where you found those spies of yours, Ars. It’s not every day you come across mercenaries so capable of espionage. I am *very* impressed, with you and them alike. I have my own way of gathering intelligence, and I was aware that some form of negotiations were being carried out between Seitz and Vasmarque, but I didn’t know how well or how far they had proceeded. If they establish an alliance, it will put us in a precarious position.”

It sounded like Couran hadn’t known about the information I sent him after all.

Good thing I bothered, I guess.

“If Seitz attacks, we will lose our current advantage,” Couran continued. “I

intend to begin conducting my own negotiations with Seitz as well. Gaining their aid may well be out of the question, but I hope to ensure they do not enter the conflict as our enemies.”

“Does that mean you’ll need another negotiator?” I asked.

“Not necessarily. Our goal is to make our position look as advantageous as possible, and to that end, a successful conclusion of our negotiations with Paradille could prove fruitful. I assume Vasmarque will lure Seitz to his side by offering them a substantial reward should he emerge victorious. In other words, if Vasmarque were to lose, then Seitz’s soldiers would have died in vain. Making Vasmarque’s chances of victory appear as slim as possible could prove instrumental in preventing this alliance.”

“Does that mean that after our talks with Paradille conclude, you’d like us to proceed to Seitz?”

“It does,” confirmed Couran. “Unless you would object, of course.”

It would mean a longer journey, yes, but I didn’t have any problem with that. I knew I couldn’t speak for Licia, though.

“I would not. But tell me, what are your feelings on the prospect, Lady Licia?”

“I, too, would not object,” she replied without even a hint of hesitation.

“Good. Your ship will set sail a week from now. If you need anything in the way of supplies or resources, you need only ask. I shall provide as much as I am capable of.”

“Thank you,” I replied.

Like Couran said, a week of waiting around for our departure ensued. He procured all the provisions we asked for, so we didn’t have to lift a finger. As a result, I found myself with quite a lot of free time that week and decided to use

it to get a feel for the city of Semplar. It was known as Summerforth's capital of trade, so I thought that just looking around might prove interesting. I also had a reasonable chunk of funding on hand, so I was on the lookout for anything interesting to buy. The first time I came to Semplar, I'd been in quite a hurry, so I left the city without ever getting the chance to see the sights—this was my chance to make up for that.

I wasn't about to go out on my own, obviously. I planned to ask Licia and Charlotte to accompany me, starting with Licia.

"I think that's a wonderful idea!" she replied without hesitation. "This is my first time in Semplar, and an abundance of sights caught my attention as we walked through the town to reach the castle. I would love to explore it with you! I would also love to take a closer look at the ocean, as well."

"The ocean, huh? Are you sure? You'll be seeing so much of it in a week that you'll be sick of it before long."

We were scheduled to travel to the capital by boat, after all. The trip was slated to take more than just a day or two, which was plenty long to get sick of the sea.

"Wh-When you put it that way, that's a fair point."

"What say we look around the marketplace? They might be selling rare and exotic goods there, for all we know."

"Semplar is famous for being a center of commerce," Licia said with a nod. "And I am quite curious what the market looks like."

"We have our destination, then."

Our plan for the day was established. The next step was to ask Charlotte to join us, but when I went to see her, she told me she'd rather spend the day

lazing about in her chambers.

The problem, however, was that Licia and I couldn't just wander around without an escort, and I'd been hoping that Charlotte would fill that role. Couran would arrange for a bodyguard if we asked, but I just couldn't bring myself to trust a stranger with my safety when Licia was in the picture. I wanted Charlotte to be out there watching our backs, and thankfully, I managed to talk her into it without putting her under too much duress.

The marketplace was located right next to the port, so the salty sea breeze graced the entire area with its distinctive scent. The market itself, meanwhile, was bustling with activity. Throngs of people walked about as merchants and hawkers cried out to advertise their wares, most of which seemed to be a wide variety of fresh fish. Some of those fish were species I'd never laid eyes on. It was my first reminder in quite some time that I was living in a world unlike the one I used to know.

One massive species with vivid red and blue stripes caught my eye. I had to wonder what sort of purpose a coloration like that could serve. Wouldn't it make it easier for its natural predators to see it? Or was the species just so big that it had no natural predators? They were said to be quite tasty and were rather expensive as well. It seemed like you were paying more for the experience of eating something rare and exotic than the fish itself.

"Look at that, Lord Ars! It's so cute!" squealed Charlotte. For someone who'd started the trip griping and moaning about how she'd rather stay inside, she'd ended up overflowing with enthusiasm as soon as we made it to the market.

This time, Charlotte's attention had been captured by a cat, though unlike the cats I knew, this one's fur was a shade of blue. Cats weren't native to Missian, so they were considered rare and exotic animals.

“Hey there, li'l miss,” called out a nearby merchant. “Looks like you know how to cast a spell or two, eh?”

“Oh, you bet I do,” replied Charlotte with a proud grin. “There aren't many people out there who can cast more spells than me!”

“In that case, I've got just the item for you!” said the merchant, brandishing his wares. “This here is a new model of mini-catalyzer! Not only are the spells you cast with it five times as powerful as the old models, but it uses *half* the aqua magia! And the best part? It can be yours for a single gold coin! You won't find a bargain like this anywhere else in all of Missian!”

The guy couldn't have sounded any less trustworthy. For one thing, I hadn't heard so much as a peep about any new types of catalyzer. Plus, if they did exist, it would've made waves throughout the empire. Catalyzer technology improvement could've rendered any form of warfare other than the magical obsolete, after all.

“For real? That's crazy,” said Charlotte with an air of complete credulity. It looked like she was liable to buy the thing if I left her to her own devices, so I stepped in and dragged her away from the merchant before she made a bad decision. “Oh, come on, Lord Ars! I was about to buy something super awesome!”

“Uh, no. I'm pretty sure you were getting gifted, Charlotte.”

“Gifted? What's that mean?”

“It means he was trying to trick you into buying something useless. Think about it, if a catalyzer of that quality existed, it would be a huge deal. I would've heard about it by now, that's for sure. He was lying to you.”

“I'd wager he was selling defective goods,” said Licia, jumping into the

exchange. “I’ve heard stories about that sort of scam—they sell you a ‘high-powered catalyzer’ that breaks down after a single spell.”

“F-For real? Then that guy’s scum! I’m gonna go give him a piece of my mind!”

“N-No, bad idea! We don’t want to be causing a scene right now!”

That merchant struck me as the sort of person who would pick a fight if he was pushed into a corner, so I stopped her before she escalated the situation. I was starting to wonder if bringing Charlotte along might’ve been an awful idea. Thankfully, the incident seemed to have made an impression on her and she stopped taking the hawkers at their word.

“This is all so incredible,” said Licia. “I’ve never seen so many unique things in one place! Hmm...?”

Suddenly, she stopped in her tracks as her gaze fell upon a blue, rose-shaped brooch.

“My, what a beautiful brooch! What sort of flower do you suppose this is? I’ve never seen one quite like it.”

Licia’s never seen a rose before? They must not be native to Summerforth, then.

The fact that it was blue meant that it wasn’t native to Earth, either, but that was beside the point. I had to wonder if blue was the standard color for roses in this world.

Licia spent a moment staring at the brooch, then looked back over at me and said, “Well then, shall we move along?”

“You’re not going to buy it? I was under the impression you’d taken quite a liking to it.”

“I do want it, yes, but I’m afraid I’ve little money on hand, so I cannot afford to be wasteful.”

The brooch wasn’t all that expensive—it cost just a single gold coin. That was affordable by my standards, so I decided that I might as well buy it for her. As a man, I felt the need to demonstrate that I could provide for her when the need arose.

“In that case, I’d be happy to buy it for you.”

“I am most grateful for the offer, Lord Ars, but at the moment, I’ve no way to return the favor,” Licia said with a shake of her head. “I do not make a habit of accruing debts that I cannot repay in short order.”

Once again, I was impressed by just how well she seemed to have her priorities sorted. I wasn’t quite ready to give up yet, however.

“I wouldn’t consider you indebted to me at all. I just wanted to buy it for you because I was hoping it would make you smile, not because I wanted you to owe me anything.”

I was speaking from the heart, but I had to admit that I was still a little embarrassed to hear the words come out of my mouth. I hadn’t thought that would be enough to sway her, but as a blush spread across her face, I realized my effort might’ve been more effective than I’d initially given it credit.

“I-I see that your silver tongue has not dulled, Lord Ars. You’ve left me with no choice—how could I turn down the gift after such a bold declaration?”

That was good enough for me. I bought the brooch, then handed it to Licia.

“Thank you very much,” she said with a broad smile as she accepted it from me. Her cheeks were still flushed as she tucked away the brooch. “This is precious indeed—I shall have to take care to choose the right moments to wear

it.”

“Huh? No, You don’t have to do that. You can wear it whenever you want.”

“Hardly! This is the very first present you’ve given me, Lord Ars. I will treasure it for the rest of my life.”

Suddenly, I found myself questioning whether I should’ve gone for something a little better than a simple brooch. If she was going to treasure it for life, perhaps something more expensive was in order. Then again, people always said that the thought was what counted when it comes to gifts...

After that, we went back to touring the city, then returned to the castle. I enjoyed myself, and I was pleased to see that Licia and Charlotte had a good time as well. We ended up going out together several more times over the next week...until the day of our departure arrived.

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It was time for us to set sail. We gathered and made our way down to Semplar’s harbor, where we found a massive, three-masted ship docked and waiting for us. I was shocked, but not by the size of the vessel—no, I was surprised by the fact that it was made out of metal rather than wood. I’d seen my fair share of boats in this world, but all of them had been made from wood. I hadn’t even realized the technology to craft one out of metal existed, so the fact that I’d be sailing on one caught me off-guard. I was no shipbuilder, but I was aware that the principle of buoyancy allowed metal ships to stay afloat back on Earth, and it seemed those rules held true here as well. The masts, I assumed, meant it was wind-powered.

“Is the ship made of metal?” Licia asked a nearby crew member.

“Yeah, that’s right,” replied the sailor.

“Then it’s a wonder that it stays afloat! How very mysterious.”

“You’re telling me. Ever heard of levitum? It’s this metal that floats in the air, all on its own. Caps out at around ten feet up if you just let it do its thing. Well, when you melt it down and mix it with iron, you get an ore that’s as strong as ever, but is light enough to float on water.”

So much for the principle of buoyancy.

“You’ll only find ships like this here in Semplar. Levitum’s some rare stuff, making a boat at this scale’s ain’t cheap, and mixing up the levitum and the iron’s not easy either. Semplar’s the one city with all the craftsmen and resources you need to make it happen,” the sailor continued. I was starting to realize we’d be traveling aboard a very valuable vessel. “And they ain’t just made of metal, either—they’re also the fastest ships in all of Summerforth! We’ve got five of ’em in our navy, and I doubt we’ll ever lose a battle at sea thanks to ’em.”

“Good day to you all, ladies and gentlemen!” a voice rang out, cutting off the conversation. I turned to look and found Couran’s son, Rengue, approaching us. Teknado was right beside him, and Robinson followed just a step behind. “And what a day it is—we couldn’t have hoped for better sailing weather! You know, this will be my first time in the capital as well. Why, I can hardly contain myself!”

There was no point in him mentioning how excited he was, considering his demeanor made it readily apparent. He didn’t seem at all apprehensive about the importance of his upcoming mission—to the contrary, he was downright

chomping at the bit to get out there and explore the unknown. His brother, on the other hand, seemed nervous.

“Oh? Wait a moment,” said Rengue, glancing at me. “You’re the child who’ll be traveling with us, aren’t you? Arsh, was it?”

“Ars, actually.”

“Y-Yes, of course! My apologies... My, what a magnificent vessel! But still, to journey the seas is a treacherous thing indeed. Do take care not to get too worked up while we’re aboard, my dear Ars!”

If any of us were in danger of getting too worked up and frolicking our way off the deck, it was him, but I resisted the urge to tell him that and replied, “I won’t.”

Charlotte, on the other hand, muttered, “If anyone’s going overboard, it’s you,” under her breath, almost giving me a heart attack in the process. Thankfully, Rengue didn’t seem to hear her.

Before we boarded, the ship’s captain called everyone together to talk. All together, there were over two hundred people who I assumed served as the vessel’s crew. It took some time for everyone to gather, at which point the captain stepped to the front of the crowd. He looked middle-aged—somewhere in his forties, perhaps—and he was wearing an eyepatch. His face was rough and grizzled, as well, so it was kind of incredible just how much he looked like a stereotypical pirate. If someone had told me he’d been one at some point, I would’ve believed it without question.

“I am Jack Testin, captain of this ship,” he said, addressing all of us. “Seems we’ll have two of Couran’s brats along for the ride, so I’ll get this out of the way right now for anyone who needs to hear it: when you’re on my ship, I am your

king and you *will* follow my orders. I don't give a damn if you're a kid or if you've never set foot on a boat in your life—if you're a passenger on my ship, you've gotta carry your weight, and if you get in the way, we'll throw you overboard... Okay, maybe not overboard, considering present company, but we'll beat you within an inch of your sorry life, so spare us all the trouble and just do what I say."

I was impressed that he had the guts to refer to Couran sans title, not to mention treat his children like that. I assumed he must have had history with Couran, and couldn't help but wonder what their relationship was. The way he talked made them sound more like friends than a lord and his retainer.

I thought for a moment that Rengue would be incensed by Jack's rudeness, but it seemed he was too intimidated to protest regardless.

"All right, all aboard, people!" called Jack, at which point we all started crossing the gangplank.

"This is such a strange sensation," said Licia as she stepped aboard.

"This swaying's gonna make me sick," added Charlotte, who was also getting her first taste of being on a boat.

"Get ready—it'll be even more noticeable once we're moving," I warned them.

"Oh?" said Charlotte, cocking her head. "Have you traveled by boat before, Lord Ars?"

"Huh? Uhhh... Yeah, technically," I replied, remembering that all my experiences with boats had occurred during my former life. This was my first time aboard one since I'd been reincarnated—and this world's boats were less equipped for smooth sailing—so I decided to try to prepare myself for a much rougher ride than I was used to.

“Cast off!” Jack shouted, his voice ringing out across the deck at a volume far louder than I’d thought the human voice was capable of. I figured he must be using sound magic to amplify his voice.

Moments later, the ship began to sail out of port.

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Our voyage had begun. It wasn’t quite as rough of a ride as I had been anticipating, but it was a lot less comfortable than the trips I’d taken aboard modern boats in my previous life. The ride was within the acceptable limit for bumpy travel as far as I was concerned, anyway. Either the captain had a very firm hand on the rudder, boats in this world were more advanced than I’d given them credit for, or the sea was just calm that day. Regardless, I didn’t get seasick at all. Unfortunately, the same could not be said for Licia, Charlotte, and Couran’s two sons.

“I believe I’m getting used to this,” moaned Licia. “My apologies for letting you witness me in such a disgraceful state, Lord Ars...”

We were below deck, and now that she was on the path to recovery, Licia was more than a little chagrined about her seasickness. It wasn’t that she was embarrassed about getting nauseous, to be clear—it was more that she’d emptied her stomach in front of me. That wasn’t the sort of thing a young girl would want to do in front of people, so I’d done my best not to watch when it happened, but that didn’t seem to have helped much.

“No need to apologize,” I said. “If anything, I’m the one who should say I’m sorry! I should have explained that being on a boat could make you sick.”

The chamber we were in was a common room. The crew wasn't allowed access, though—as it was a cabin reserved for noble passengers and their attendants. And speaking of attendants, Charlotte burst into the room just a moment later.

“No good,” she declared out of nowhere.

“What's no good?” I asked.

“I tried to go above deck, and they said I wasn't allowed 'cause it's too dangerous.”

“Well, I mean, yeah.”

“But I wanna get a better look at the ocean!”

“There's a window in your room, right? Why not just look from there?”

“Hmm... I dunno. It just feels like it'd be nicer to see it from up on the deck.”

I could see where she was coming from, but there was no denying that going above deck involved its fair share of dangers. All complaints aside, I was happy to see that Charlotte seemed to be doing well. She'd been blue in the face and moaning about how she was going to die just a little earlier.

“Oh! Good day to you,” said Teknado, who wandered into the room just a moment after Charlotte. He greeted us as soon as he noticed us, which sort of impressed me. In terms of social standing, he was miles above anyone else present, so his courtesy struck me as remarkable.

“Good day to you, Lord Teknado,” I replied. “I hope you've recovered from your seasickness.”

“I have, yes. My brother, however, is still in the thick of it. Last I heard, he was moaning about how he would 'never set foot on one of these accursed vessels

again.”

I winced. From the sound of things, Rengue was even more prone to seasickness than the rest of our party.

“Pardon the intrusion,” said Robinson as he stepped inside just a moment after Teknado. He had escaped the seasickness epidemic entirely. I had to wonder if he’d spent a fair deal of time on boats. “It seems everyone has recovered, so I was hoping to discuss several matters before we arrive at the capital. Is that acceptable?”

“Lord Rengue hasn’t quite recovered yet, to my understanding,” I noted. “Is that going to be a problem?”

“I have already explained everything to Lord Rengue, so no, it will not. Though whether or not he heard a word I said to him is an altogether different matter,” he added, doing very little to mask his exasperation.

Robinson didn’t seem to hold Rengue in the highest esteem. I’d seen the two of them interact and it didn’t seem like he outright hated him, at least. If I had to describe their relationship, I would say that Robinson treated Rengue like an irresponsible younger sibling.

“Well, I’m free to hear your explanation,” I replied. Licia nodded in agreement.

“Very good. There are many matters I would like to bring to your attention before the negotiations commence. First and foremost, I should note that I do not anticipate our talks with the Imperial House to be especially fraught. Our relations with them stand in good order, and I see no reason to believe they will reject our request once we’ve supplied them with the requisite funding. The talks with Paradille, however, are a different matter altogether. Our relations

with them could hardly be any worse.”

“Why is that?” I asked. “What’s put us on such bad terms with the whole duchy?”

“The source of the conflict arose after the revolution in magical technology began,” Robinson explained. “At the time, Missian and Paradille were close allies. Trouble began when it became clear that a certain variety of magistone could only be mined in Paradille—a variety that Missian’s nobility had an intense desire to own. Paradille, however, shut down any attempt at trade. The magistone in question was quite rare, and they had no intention of allowing any of it to make its way outside the duchy’s borders. Missian responded by breaking the alliance with Paradille and declaring war, hoping to obtain all the magistone they wanted in the process.”

Assuming all of that was true, it sounded like Missian was in the wrong. I had to wonder what sort of magistone could have driven them to make such a bold move.

“Ultimately, the emperor—who still possessed considerable influence at the time—intervened on Paradille’s behalf, and Missian was forced to withdraw. This all happened some time ago, but due to that incident, the Duke of Paradille lost all faith in Missian’s nobility...and it seems he’s made a point of passing that distrust down to his heirs.”

“Well, now I’m starting to wonder if it’s going to be possible to negotiate with them at all,” I sighed.

“I share your doubts,” replied Robinson with a nod. “I believe having the Imperial House backing our cause will make Paradille lend us an ear, but the duke’s grudge is quite deep-seated. I fear he will be inclined to turn us down offhand regardless. Moreover, the Duchy of Paradille has its own fair share of

troubles to deal with. I cannot predict how the negotiations will turn out—their results rest upon our shoulders.”

Well, if I wasn't feeling the pressure before, I am now!

Then again, I was effectively attending the negotiations in the capacity of an assistant's assistant. The real expectations were resting on Robinson's shoulders. As long as I did my best to help him out, I figured I'd be doing my job well enough.

And hey, if he doesn't ever need help, I'm just taking a vacation on someone else's dime! That doesn't sound bad at all!

After several days of smooth sailing, we arrived at the capital.



Chapter 3: **Negotiations**

“So this is the capital,” I muttered to myself as I stepped off the deck of the ship. Looking out over the cityscape, I was struck by how the design of the buildings was subtly different from the ones I was used to back in Missian. I’d thought that Semplar was huge, but the capital was even larger, with its most eye-catching feature being the enormous castle in the center of the city. It was, without a doubt, the biggest castle I’d ever seen.

Now, we were still in Summerforth, but I hadn’t forgotten that every duchy of the empire had been its own country at one point, so I was expecting there to be plenty of things I wasn’t familiar with. I’d heard, for instance, that there were linguistic differences between the various duchies. I wondered if I’d even be able to communicate well in the capital. I decided to ask Robinson to assuage my worries.

“The people here will understand you, yes,” he replied, much to my relief. “There are peculiarities to the speech here, as you’ve heard, but I doubt you’ll have any trouble. Some duchies speak different languages, but their nobility will be familiar with our tongue.”

I took that to mean the people in the capital spoke a different dialect. As long as they could understand me, I figured it wouldn’t be an issue.

“It’s been so long since we’ve been on dry land that not feeling the ship rocking is making me feel unsteady,” noted Licia as she stepped off the ship. I knew what she meant—when you spend long enough on a boat, you stop noticing that rocking sensation until you step onto land and it feels like the whole world’s moving beneath you.

As Rengue stepped onto the dock, a tall, long-haired man walked up to him, gave him a deep, formal bow, and began to speak.

“We have anxiously awaited your arrival, Lord Rengue Salemakhia, Lord Teknado Salemakhia. I bid you and your attendants welcome to the Imperial Capital of Ranverth. The Imperial House stands ready to provide you and yours the utmost hospitality.”

The man was wearing what looked like a butler’s uniform, and several similarly-dressed individuals were lined up behind him. It struck me that while the words he spoke were more or less indistinguishable from the language I spoke, his intonation was unlike what I was used to. I assumed he was attempting the Missian dialect, but the characteristic intonation of his own natural dialect was still showing through.

In any case, it seemed clear that he and the rest of the retinue had been sent to greet us by the Imperial House. That led me to realize we weren’t unexpected visitors. Couran must have gotten into contact with them and informed them of our journey while we were preparing for the trip. The tall man in front looked quite competent at a glance, so I gave him an appraisal just for good measure. However, he ended up not having any stand-out abilities after all. I learned that his name was Den Martinez, at least.

Anyway, I’d been worried that Rengue would end up putting on airs when confronted with one of the Imperial House’s servants, but much to my relief, his reply was polite and cordial. Come to think of it, if he weren’t capable of at least the bare minimum when it came to etiquette, he would never have been sent to negotiate with the emperor himself.

“My name is Den Martinez,” said the butler, “I serve as steward to His Majesty the Emperor. Please, allow me to guide you to the castle.”

We took Den up on his offer and made our way toward the emperor's fortress. That involved walking a fair distance through the streets of the capital, and frankly, my first impression wasn't positive. The streets were filthy, and there were beggars on every corner. I could tell that the populace here was impoverished, which was strange, considering that seaside cities like this one tended to flourish on account of the trade that flowed through them. On the other hand, I'd heard that the Imperial House itself was in dire financial straits, and I imagined that the state of their seat of power was a reflection of that. I had to assume their current leaders had wasteful spending habits, didn't know how to bring in a decent income, or possibly both.

Castle Ranverth was large, even viewed from a distance, but as we drew closer, its sheer scale became more and more evident. Den led us up to the gates, where we found a very short man arguing with one of the guards.

"I said no, dammit! Outta the question!" roared the guard.

"C'mon, I know you can do something! We're mates, ain't we?!" pleaded the man. *Now* I was starting to see the slight differences between our dialect and the local one.

"Since when've I been your mate?! And even if I were, you wouldn't be gettin' through this gateway!" snapped the guard.

"I swear to you, my theories are all sound! I know the airship'll fly if you use these blueprints to build it! Let me through, please!" the man shouted, waving around a rolled-up sheet of parchment.

"Dunno what you're talkin' about, and I don't care, either! You're not passin' through, and that's the end of it! Off with you!"

Blueprints for an airship?

Suddenly, the man had my full attention. The stat blocks that my skill gave me had an aptitude for “Aerial” listed, but I’d never heard of any sort of military operations conducted in the air. I’d always been curious about what that meant, but so long had passed without an answer that I’d more or less given up on trying to figure it out. Could it be that the skill was referring to airships that had yet to be invented? And could this man be holding the plans for those very vessels? I couldn’t help but wonder, so I decided to appraise him.

Shin Seimallo
Age: 17
Male
Status:
LEA: 22/66
VAL: 25/78
INT: 88/89
POL: 32/74
Ambition: 45
Aptitudes:
Infantry: D
Cavalry: D
Archer: A
Mage: B
Fortification: D
Weaponry: S
Naval: D
Aerial: S
Strategy: C

His name, it seemed, was Shin Seimallo, and he was still quite young—only

seventeen at present. His stats were high for someone of his age, though, with his Intelligence standing out. What caught my eye, however, were his S-ranked Aptitudes for Weaponry and Aerial combat.

“You again?” sighed Den as we approached the gate.

“Ugh!” grunted Shin. The look on his face told me that Den’s arrival was not a positive development, and the way he beat a hasty retreat a moment later reinforced that assumption.

“Who was that?” asked Rengue.

“His name is Shin,” replied Den. “He claims to have designed a flying ship, and that if provided with enough funding and manpower, he’ll be able to build it. Unfortunately, he’s an ill-bred commoner who nobody in authority would ever humor. He makes his way to the gates time and time again, begging to be heard. It would be a shame if someone so young were to be executed for his insolence, but I’m afraid I can’t see the situation turning out any other way...”

“Hmm... My father has been putting resources into airship development as well, as it so happens, but I’ve been told the creation of a functional ship is still a long way off. We haven’t heard of a single successful attempt across all of Summerforth, in fact. I have a hard time believing that an uneducated commoner would make that final, pivotal breakthrough!”

That answered one question. As I’d suspected, a functional airship had yet to be invented. As far as Shin was concerned, I could tell he was more than a little boorish, at least on a first impression, but my skill told a different story. An S ranking in Weaponry and Aerial plus a high Intelligence made it believable that he could be the one to revolutionize the field, though far from guaranteed, of course.

The invention of a functional airship would be a very big deal, and I was tempted to recruit him. It was pretty obvious that nobody in the capital was inclined to take him under their wing, so I had a feeling that he'd jump at the opportunity to work for me. I resolved to broach the subject with him if I happened to run into him again.

"My apologies for the delay. Please follow me," Den said, then led us through the gates and into the castle.

Coming straight from Castle Semplar, the decor in Castle Ranverth seemed rather modest. No artwork decorated the hallways, and I had to assume that the Imperial House's lack of funds was to blame.

"His Majesty the Emperor is expecting you," explained Den as we walked through the castle. "I shall lead you to the audience chamber at once."

Sounds like we'll be meeting him right away.

I was aware there was a chance I'd get to meet the emperor despite my comparatively low status, but I hadn't expected it to happen so soon.

We stepped into the audience room. A throne was set up in the very center of the chamber, though nobody was seated atop it at the moment. Instead, a man stepped forward. His red hair was on the longer side, and something about his features felt sinister. He looked to be in his mid-twenties or so, as far as I could tell, and he was dressed in an expensive and somewhat ostentatious outfit.

"I welcome you, Lord Rengue and associates. I am Shakhma Dolyze, Chancellor of the Summerforth Empire," said the man, his words carrying a sense of grace and refinement.

I didn't know what the chancellor's duties were, but I had to assume it was a position of great power.

Maybe he's something like a regent, and he manages the government in the emperor's place? But the emperor himself could be handling those matters by now...

In any case, Shakhma appeared to be an important person, so I decided to appraise him.

Shakhma Dolyze
Age: 28
Male
Status:
LEA: 77/88
VAL: 62/76
INT: 87/96
POL: 72/77
Ambition: 90
Aptitudes:
Infantry: C
Cavalry: B
Archer: D
Mage: D
Fortification: D
Weaponry: D
Naval: C
Aerial: C
Strategy: S

Not bad stats at all...but that Ambition!

I remembered that the current emperor of Summerforth was still quite

young—only five years older than I was, which would make him seventeen. He had succeeded the throne at the age of eight, and last I'd heard, he was a puppet to his advisors. An emperor like that having a chancellor with an Ambition score of ninety was concerning, to say the least. Part of me had to worry for his safety.

"I shall summon the emperor momentarily. Please wait here," said Shakhma, who then left the room.

A moment later, a voice rang out.

"Make way for His Majesty, the Emperor of Summerforth!"

Petty lords like me had no hope of ever being granted an audience with the emperor. We were, however, trained on the appropriate etiquette for such an occasion, just in case. It wasn't all that complicated—you just had to bow deeply when he entered the chamber and rise once he bade you to do so. The problem was that Charlotte was with us. She hadn't received instruction in any sort of etiquette, much less etiquette regarding the Imperial House. I glanced back to see if she was following our example, only to find her standing upright and yawning. Fortunately, I managed to whisper frantic instructions to her, get her to bow, and bow myself before the emperor made it into the chamber.

I heard footsteps drawing closer. I couldn't see what was happening, but I could tell that somebody had entered the room. I had to assume it was the emperor himself. Eventually, a voice rang out, "You may rise," in a slow tone. I looked up.

"We are the twelfth Emperor of Summerforth, Charles Bydoras," said the young man sitting atop the throne before us. My first impression of him was that he looked remarkably, well, unremarkable. His garb was of the finest quality and he wore a crown upon his head, but his face was as ordinary as they

came.

It wasn't like I was under the impression that nobility guaranteed good looks or anything! It's just that, well, I assumed the emperor himself would be a handsome man, or at least have the sort of face that exuded a sense of charisma, somehow. But no, instead, I was faced with a man who looked so ordinary that I would never have imagined he was the emperor if he'd dressed like a commoner.



In any case, I stood before the emperor and was beyond curious how capable he was, so I appraised him on the spot.

Charles Bydoras
Age: 17
Male
Status:
LEA: 22/54
VAL: 55/65
INT: 46/54
POL: 34/56
Ambition: 0
Aptitudes:
Infantry: C
Cavalry: D
Archer: D
Mage: D
Fortification: D
Weaponry: C
Naval: C
Aerial: D
Strategy: D

His stats were the definition of unexceptional. The one point that made him remarkable was his Ambition—he had a score of zero, the lowest I’d ever seen.

I guess when you’re guaranteed the position of emperor from birth, there’s nothing else left for you to aspire to.

On the other hand, plenty of duchies were already moving toward

independence, so I couldn't say with confidence that he was the preeminent authority in Summerforth. If he had any aspirations to bring the duchies under his heel, I had to assume his Ambition would be a *little* higher, so I was left to conclude that he was just an unambitious person by nature.

In any case, the emperor had made his introduction, and Rengue followed suit by giving a rather overblown introduction of his own. Then, Shakhma spoke up once more.

"Now then," he said. "Let us proceed to the matter at hand. In my capacity as chancellor, I shall hear your request on His Majesty's behalf. Though I have already been apprised of the details of your visit, I would begin by hearing them in your own words, if you would be so kind."

It seemed we wouldn't be negotiating with the emperor after all. Rengue took the lead, explaining that we were hoping they would help mediate our talks with Paradille.

"And I trust that you would pledge some form of tribute to His Majesty in return for this intervention?" asked Shakhma.

"Of course," replied Rengue. "We are willing to offer twenty thousand gold coins in advance, with a further twenty thousand to be paid should our negotiations succeed."

"Twenty *thousand*... It seems the rumors of Semplar's prosperity were not exaggerated," Shakhma muttered, sounding downright shocked. "His Majesty would certainly be able to put funding of that quantity to good use. However, before we proceed, there is something I would like to ask you."

"Please, go right ahead," said Rengue.

"Should your father, Lord Couran, emerge victorious from his war and unite

Missian under his banner...what does he intend to do next?"

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"I mean to ask whether you intend to act in opposition to Imperial rule. To put it in simpler terms, I have apprehensions regarding Missian. Does your father intend to declare independence and rule over the duchy as an independent kingdom?" asked Shakhma. Rengue was shaken, and visibly so. "If you do harbor such intentions, then I believe it goes without saying that His Majesty will not lend you his support under any circumstances."

"W-Well, of course we," Rengue began, then faltered. Couran had made his intention to declare independence clear, so Shakhma's suspicions were valid. Rengue, unfortunately, was well aware of that, and if he was to lose his composure in a moment of panic, it would be a death sentence for our negotiations.

"Lord Couran has no desire or intention to declare independence, Your Lordship," said Robinson, jumping in to save the day. "He has sworn an oath of fealty to His Majesty the Emperor, and he has not forgotten the weight of that commitment."

"And you would be...?" asked Shakhma, raising an eyebrow.

"Please forgive my insolence, Your Lordship. I am Robinson Renjee, retainer of House Salemakhia."

"Sir Robinson, then," said Shakhma. "Tell me—does your lord *truly* value his oath to the Imperial House? When the ruling house of Rofeille rose in rebellion and pointed their swords at us, we called upon Missian for aid...but to no avail. Not a single regiment was sent to defend the emperor you swore to serve. I would hardly call that an action befitting a loyal vassal. Perhaps you, however,

would beg to differ?”

“Respectfully, Your Lordship, Lord Couran held no sway over that decision. At that point in time, his father, Lord Amador, held the position of Duke of Missian. The decision to withhold reinforcements was indeed made from a position of disloyalty, but said disloyalty was the work of the duke alone. As it so happens, Lord Couran opposed his father’s decision and argued that Missian should intervene on the empire’s behalf, though tragically, his pleas fell upon deaf ears.”

I was all but certain that Robinson’s story was an outright lie. It was rather impressive that he could lie so well and with such little hesitation. I had to wonder if he’d anticipated this line of questioning in advance...but no, if he had, he would have briefed Rengue on the appropriate response, and there would’ve been no need for Robinson to intervene. It seemed he was lying off the cuff.

“Vasmarque, on the other hand, has inherited his father’s treasonous inclinations,” Robinson continued. “Should he gain control of Missian, it is all but guaranteed that he will make a bid for independence. Lord Couran has raised his forces in opposition to his brother to prevent such a thing from coming to pass.”

“Is that so...?” asked Shakhma. I couldn’t tell if he was convinced yet, but Robinson had delivered his story with such confidence that I almost believed it myself, even knowing for a fact that he wasn’t being honest. “And what guarantee can you offer to prove you are telling the truth?”

“I would not dare lie to you before His Majesty the Emperor, Your Lordship. Every word I have spoken is the honest truth, and I am certain that Lord Rengue will corroborate my claims.”

“Ah,” grunted Rengue. “Y-Yes, of course. My father’s retainer speaks true indeed. I swear it upon the emperor’s name.”

Rengue was in a state of panic. It wasn’t hard to tell that, and I was worried that he might cast suspicion upon Robinson’s whole story. I wasn’t sure if Shakhma had believed every word of it, but he acquiesced to our request and agreed to offer the emperor’s backing in our negotiations with Paradille.

I had learned one thing from the first round of negotiations: if Missian were to declare its independence in the future, the Imperial House would do everything in its power to prevent it. Of course, there would be a lot of strife even if we hadn’t talked up our loyalty, but it would only be worse after we so blatantly claimed that we had no intentions of doing anything of the sort. If Missian declared independence after all that, the odds of us ever reconciling with the empire were nonexistent. I had to wonder if we’d overstepped by making such a claim, but I figured it was better than letting the negotiations end in failure, and it was too late to take it back now.

“We shall send a letter to the Duke of Paradille shortly,” said Shakhma as the negotiations came to a close. “We would ask that you remain in the capital until we receive a reply.”

Thus, despite an unexpected question derailing the whole meeting, our negotiations with the Imperial House came to a successful conclusion.

○

“I did what I had to, but I fear I may have gone too far,” muttered Robinson after we departed from the audience chambers. We’d found a quiet place

where we knew for a fact that nobody could hear us, and settled down to discuss what had transpired.

“You do? Why?” asked Rengue. “You weathered the storm! It seems like it all turned out well to me.”

“Not only did I tell the emperor a bald-faced lie, but I also swore that I was speaking the truth,” Robinson explained. “After I delivered such a firm and unambiguous statement, Lord Couran’s eventual declaration of independence will make the empire lose face. War is an inevitability.”

“Hmm... I doubt they would turn a blind eye to our independence regardless,” replied Rengue.

“True, but without this sort of open provocation, we would have a much easier time suing for peace. I’m certain Lord Couran does not wish to declare independence, only to be plunged into an endless war with the empire.”

“Hmm, hmm. I see...”

“As such, I fear the outcome of our talk with the emperor was far from ideal. Would you concur, Lady Licia? How would you have conducted yourself, were you in my position?” Robinson asked, turning to Licia. It felt like he was testing her.

“Let me see... To start, I do not believe that you made a poor decision, Sir Robinson. Ensuring that the Imperial House will aid in our negotiations was our first and foremost priority, and you prioritized the success of our objective above all else. I admire your ability to speak before the emperor himself with such confidence and grace. That said, if I had been in your position...hmm...” Licia trailed off there. It seemed she’d opened with a compliment to soften the blow of her true opinion. “I don’t believe I would have chosen to swear fealty

with such absolute certainty. We know how great the Imperial House's need for funding is, and when Lord Rengue told the chancellor how much we were willing to offer, he almost gave in right there. I was stunned by the sum as well, in fact! I believe that the negotiations would have worked out even had we taken the risk of showing a small degree of disrespect. You could have, for instance, feigned offense at the implication that Lord Couran would be disloyal and implied that you intended to withdraw the offer. The Chancellor may have even apologized!"

"Perhaps."

"All that said, in terms of maximizing the chances of the negotiations succeeding, your method was superior, Sir Robinson. As such, I would hesitate to say you made a poor decision."

"No," said Robinson with a shake of his head. "In retrospect, I believe your method may have been the best option available to us. It would entail a degree of risk, to be sure...but considering the current state of the empire, I doubt they had the leeway to reject the funding we were offering. If I were a more skilled negotiator, I may have been able to dodge or deflect the question. My inadequacies have never been more painfully apparent."

"Well, that is all water under the bridge. Let us move to more pressing matters," Robinson said, picking himself up again with remarkable speed. He was a man with remarkable mental resilience. "We have some time before our talks with Paradille begin. I have dispatched a spy, who I trained, to the capital of Paradille, with instructions to report on anything regarding the state of the duchy that may aid us in our negotiations. I believe that the spy will be arriving with information any day now, and once we've learned all we can, we should determine our overall diplomatic strategy. I would like the two of you to

participate in that discussion, Lord Ars, Lady Licia. I trust you're willing?"

"Of course," I replied. "That's the whole reason we made this journey."

I'd feel pretty guilty if I went home without ever helping!

Licia replied that she would be happy to participate as well.

"Well then, you are welcome to do as you please until my spy reports in. Oh, and I almost forgot—I doubt this will serve any purpose in future negotiations, but did you happen to appraise His Majesty the Emperor and his chancellor, Lord Ars?"

"I did, yes."

"If possible, I would be interested in hearing anything you've learned."

"Yes, of course," I said, then explained the details of their stats to him.

"I see," replied Robinson with a thoughtful nod. "So the emperor is an ordinary person, and Shakhma is capable, but likely treacherous."

"Correct," I confirmed.

"Thank you—this has been most enlightening. I must say, I'm astonished that your power can even judge a man's loyalty! It is an astonishing ability indeed, and I hope that I am never forced to stand in opposition to you."

It wasn't clear to me why Robinson had wanted to learn about their abilities. Either he was just curious, or he was thinking past the upcoming negotiations and preparing for the the inevitable outcome where Missian declares independence. I assumed the latter was the case, given that Robinson didn't seem like the sort of person who would ask that sort of question to satisfy his curiosity, and did seem like someone who would think several steps ahead of the present moment. Not that it mattered to me either way.

I was still exhausted from the trip, so I spent the rest of that day resting at an inn. The next day, however, I was free to do as I pleased, so I had to think about what I wanted to accomplish while I was in the capital. In the end, I decided to just walk around, see the sights, and look for potential recruits. I'd already gathered that the people of the capital were more impoverished than I'd expected, so I had a feeling I'd have decent luck recruiting anyone who stood out.

I was on a fast track to becoming the Count of Canarre, if the war went well, and if that happened, I'd need more talented retainers than ever. Plus, even if I wasn't looking at an oncoming promotion, having more capable help was never a bad thing. Thus, I set out into the city with Charlotte as my guard and Licia as an unexpected tagalong.

"Umm, Licia?" I asked when she made her intent to join me clear. "You know that I'm looking for recruits, right? I doubt this is going to be very fun for you."

"You could hardly be more mistaken! *Anything* is fun so long as I'm with you, Lord Ars. Besides, I'm interested in watching you put your power to use."

"What's there to watch? All I do is look at people."

"Are you sure that's all there is to it? You don't have some sort of special trick?" Licia pressed.

"I don't, no."

Is she trying to figure out what makes my appraisals work, or something?

"All right, then—why don't you tell me about that man's abilities?" Licia suggested, pointing to a brawny man who was standing nearby.

I decided to humor her and appraised him, painfully aware of Licia staring at me as I did so. His Valor was a little above average, but the rest of his abilities

were awful—he was a real musclehead.

“All right, finished,” I said.

“Already?”

“Yes. And I wasn’t surprised by the results—he’s as strong as he looks, but he doesn’t have what it takes to lead soldiers or think deeply about much of anything.”

“I see,” said Licia, still staring intently at me. “It’s true, then—you don’t do anything special, at least as far as I can tell. To be honest, I suspected that you were using magic to enable your talent.”

“Does that sort of magic even exist?” I asked.

“If it does, I have yet to hear of it. However, new forms of magic are being discovered on a near-daily basis, so I cannot rule out the possibility. This does seem to be particular to you, though, which raises all sorts of questions. Were you born with that ability?”

“Yes, I was,” I replied. “But you’re the same way, aren’t you? Don’t you have the ability to tell how people feel about you?”

“I do, but I wasn’t born with it. I obtained that sense of how people perceive me after spending a very long time observing others and taking note of their mannerisms. I believe that anyone could learn to do what I do, provided they invest enough effort into the task, but your power is different. Perhaps God has chosen to favor you?”

I didn’t believe for a second that just about anyone could obtain Licia’s preternatural sense, but she was right that my power was downright impossible to learn. I had to assume that having been reincarnated from another world had something to do with how I obtained the ability. This sort of thing was rare, but

I couldn't rule out the possibility that other people had powers similar to it, even if Licia wasn't one of them. Regardless, I soon went back to searching for recruits, and Licia went back to staring at me all the while.

"Hey, Lord Ars," Charlotte suddenly piped up. "If you're searching for new hires, mind looking for someone who can use magic?"

"A mage, huh? Never hurts to have more of those around...but honestly, with you by my side, I don't think I'm lacking in the magic department."

"Okay, but I've been to battle a bunch of times, right? And the biggest thing I've learned is that magic is crazy important," said Charlotte. "My spells are the best, don't get me wrong, but none of our other mages are worth much. We could use a few more folks who know their stuff."

She had a point. I'd never witnessed a real battle, but I'd been told how pivotal magic's role in war was more times than I could count. The one problem was that people with a talent for magic were hard to find. A B-ranked Aptitude for magic was high, and very rare to boot. I was pretty sure Charlotte was the only person I'd ever seen with a rank above A, and I could count the number of A-rankers I'd found on one hand. In fact, the only one I could remember offhand was one of the Shadows—Ben, maybe? At the very least, I knew for a fact that I hadn't found any other S-rankers.

"I don't mind keeping an eye out for magic users, but they're pretty rare, so don't get your hopes up."

"Oh, are they?" replied Charlotte, a little disappointed.

"House Pleide has no skilled mages at all," said Licia. "I think you're even more remarkable of a person than you realize, Lady Charlotte!"

"Remarkable... I like the sound of that," Charlotte muttered as Licia's

compliment went right to her head in record time.

We spent a lot of time walking around the capital, but in the end, I didn't find anyone with a notable talent for magic. Just as I was getting tired enough to suggest returning to the inn, I heard a familiar voice.

"Please, I'm begging you! I just need a loan! I'll pay you back before you know it, I swear!"

I turned to look...and found a small-statured young man prostrating himself before a man who looked like a merchant. It took me a minute, but I remembered where I'd seen the young man before: he was Shin Seimallo, the person who'd claimed he could build an airship when we first went to see the emperor. Unfortunately, his supplications seemed to have fallen on deaf ears, as the merchant departed without saying so much as a word.



"Hellfire!" Shin shouted, standing up and stomping the ground in a rage. At that point, he noticed that I was watching him and shot me a sharp glare. "What's your problem?! This ain't a show, brat!"

I guess staring at him while he was bowing and scraping was a little rude of me.

"Sorry," I said. "I didn't mean to upset you."

"Then beat it before I get even madder!" Shin roared. He was in a truly foul mood, though after prostrating in public and still getting turned down, I couldn't blame him. I could tell that I was going to have a hard time making him to listen to me, but I also knew that if I left now, I might never see him again.

Let's give talking a try, at least!

"I'm afraid I can't do that. I have something I'd like to discuss, you see," I told him.

"Huh? *You* wanna talk to me?" said Shin, his glare growing sharper still.

"Could it be that this man has some sort of talent, Lord Ars?" asked Licia.

"That's right."

"He a mage?" asked Charlotte.

"No. Well, he can use magic to some extent, but that's not the talent that caught my eye."

"Oh, boo! Let's go, then. We don't need him," Charlotte grumbled. She wasn't one for delicacy.

"Look me in the eye and say that again, ya surly little harlot! If you want a fight, you're doin' a damn fine job of pickin' one!" Shin shouted, now enraged.

“She’s not, really! You have the wrong idea!” I yelled, jumping in between the two of them.

“Charlotte, shut up for a second!” I whispered over my shoulder, then turned back to Shin. “Ahem! My name is Ars Louvent, and I come from Lamberg, a district of the County of Canarre in Missian.”

“Missian? No wonder you talk like a buncha bumpkins,” commented Shin. In my book, he was the one who was talking funny, but that sort of thing was just a matter of perspective.

“Your name is Shin Seimallo, correct?” I asked.

“H-How’d you know that?!” asked Shin, a wary look in his eyes. The truth was that I’d learned it by appraising him, but I decided to claim that Den had told me about him after our encounter with Shin at the castle gates. “Oh, so you’re the one who was with the butler back then. I thought you looked familiar.”

“That’s how I learned about your ambition to build an airship. I’m very interested in your plan, and as it so happens, I am the head of a noble household back in Missian.”

“A noble household? You’re a lord? But you’re just a brat!”

“My father passed away while I was young, and I inherited his title,” I explained.

“Oh, so you’re like the emperor, eh? And wait—did’ja say you’re interested in my airship?”

“I am, yes.”

“F-For real?! Then take a look at this!” Shin shouted as he forced the airship blueprints he was carrying into my hands. I had a feeling I wouldn’t be able to make heads or tails of them, but I took a look anyway, just for good measure.

Needless to say, after a couple moments inspecting the plans, I came away with maybe even less of an idea about whether or not it would fly than I'd had before I looked. All that I could say for sure was that it was designed to fly using principles unlike those that the planes and blimps on Earth used. As best as I could tell, Shin's design was supposed to work using some sort of magical whatsit.

"So? What do you think? I can build it, I'm positive!" Shin insisted.

"I'm afraid I'm not well-versed in the field of aeronautics, so I can't tell at all."

"Eh? You're not? Then give that back!" snapped Shin as he snatched the plans away from me.

"To be clear, I'm not knowledgeable in the field, but I am very interested."

"Well, I mean, who wouldn't be? It should be obvious that airships are the future."

"I agree. And while I lack the expertise to say whether or not your plans are feasible, I can say with certainty that you have the talent to make one."

"Eh? How would you know somethin' like that?" Shin asked. I gave him a quick explanation about how I had the power to perceive people's strengths, and he nodded in understanding. "Oh, gotcha... If it made you believe I've got real talent, then your power must be the real deal, too."

I'd been a little worried that springing the truth on him out of nowhere would just make him more skeptical, but to my surprise, he believed me without question.

He must believe in his own abilities to a ridiculous degree...

"You said you're a lord, right...?" asked Shin, a hint of hope creeping into his voice. "D-Does that mean you'll fund me?! See, I've been thinkin' I could build

my ship if I had the resources, but I'm broke!"

"How much would you need?" I asked.

"I could make a small one with about a thousand gold!"

"A thousand gold... I'm afraid that's out of my budget at the moment."

I had a feeling that Couran would loan me the money if I asked him, but the consequences if Shin's project failed would be pretty dire in that case. The odds of him succeeding were quite high, to be sure, but I wasn't quite prepared to bet on it. That left me with just one choice: to become the Count of Canarre and commission the project afterward.

"Missian is on the brink of war at the moment, but if my side emerges victorious, my territory will expand," I explained. "My income will increase at that point as well, and I'll likely have a thousand gold to spare. If everything goes as planned, I'd like to fund your project when that time comes."

"R-Really?! That means I'm in for a real wait, eh? Wait, doesn't that mean I'd have to pack up and move to Missian?"

"Yes."

"Hmm," mumbled Shin, hesitating for a moment.

"I won't ask you to commit yourself to this arrangement right away," I clarified. "I'll be in the capital for some time longer, so just try to decide before I leave."

Shin, however, shook his head and immediately replied, "Nah, all good. I'll go. No matter how hard I work, nobody's ever gonna spare me a copper here—the locals wouldn't know talent if it hit 'em with a brick! Stickin' with you's my best shot of making my dream a reality."

“Is that so? In that case, feel free to accompany us when we return to Missian. How should we get in contact with you when the time comes?”

Shin gave us his address, then ran off to prepare for the journey.

Thankfully, it seemed my day of headhunting had been a success. I’d recruited a budding engineer who just might build me an airship someday.

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I spent the next two days looking for more potential new hires, but didn’t find anyone who lived up to my standards. After that, a message arrived from Robinson informing us that the spy from Paradille had arrived. He wanted to discuss our strategy for the upcoming negotiations, so Licia and I went over to his room.

The inn we were staying at was a very high-class establishment, and since we were traveling on Rengue and his father’s dime, we’d rented out the whole place.

“Thank you for coming,” said Robinson as we stepped into his room. I glanced around and found that he was alone.

“No need to thank us—this is what we’re here for. Will Lord Rengue and Lord Teknado be arriving later?”

“The two of them will not be participating in this discussion,” replied Robinson.

Oh, weird.

I could see why Teknado would be left out, but I’d been certain that Rengue

would attend. Had he refused to participate? Or had Robinson refrained from inviting him, since he would likely get in the way? Whatever the case, I didn't have a problem with his absence.

"Before we begin, I have news to share," said Robinson. "It seems the war in Missian has begun."

"Huh? Already?"

"So it would seem. Lord Couran made the first move, marching his troops into the County of Alpharda, which lies between Semplar and Velshdt. Meanwhile, Vasmarque launched a surprise attack upon Ludawson, a district of the County of Faama. One of Missian's larger magistone mines is located in Ludawson, which gives the territory great strategic value. I believe his strategy is to use the minimum number of forces necessary to seize locations of that general nature, depriving us of necessary resources while his own troops are bolstered. One of Vasmarque's tacticians is known for his surprise attacks, and I suspect that they will prove to be a major thorn in our side."

I hadn't expected the war to escalate already, and I hadn't expected the enemy's tactics to be so hard to deal with. It seemed we'd be fighting a losing battle if we let the war drag out.

"Well, forget all that, let's move to the topic at hand. To begin with, I will provide some necessary context regarding Paradille itself. Paradille is the least populated duchy in all of Summerforth, and it also shares borders with nearly every other duchy in the Empire. As a natural consequence, it has faced a disproportionate degree of aggression from other duchies that view it as an easy target. There are, however, a number of reasons why Paradille has yet to fall under the control of another duchy," Robinson continued. "For one, a mountain range known as the Ruffords runs along the duchy's northwest and

western border, placing a physical barrier between it and two of its neighboring duchies, Scheutz and Canshiep. The presence of the mountain range makes mounting an invasion from either of those directions difficult. Another significant factor is the strength of Paradille's military. Not only are their troops skilled, but Paradille is also the duchy with consistent access to healing magic, which gives them a significant advantage. Their numbers may not be remarkable, but they are still a fighting force no less capable than any other duchy."

I glanced at a nearby map. Paradille was in the center of Summerforth, so that explained how they hadn't been spared invasion.

"As for the information my spy provided, it would seem Paradille faces several problems at the present moment," said Robinson, moving on to the next topic. "A series of crop failures have left the duchy in a state of near-famine. Plus, Paradille's relations with Scheutz have deteriorated. It seems the ruling powers of Scheutz are seeking a means to traverse the mountains and mount an invasion of Paradille. From Scheutz's perspective, Paradille is the perfect staging ground from which to conquer the rest of the continent, and the healing magic enabled by Paradille's magistone mines is a prize far too valuable to ignore. My spy also reported that the mines' output of healing magistone has been diminishing by the year."

"It sounds like they have a lot on their plate right now. That works in our favor, doesn't it? Their conflict with Scheutz has to be a pressing issue on their minds, so provoking Missian can't be on their current list of priorities. In the worst case, they could end up fighting us and Scheutz on two fronts."

No matter how capable Paradille's military was, I had a hard time imagining they would be able to defend their duchy under conditions like those.

“Quite. There should be many benefits to forging an alliance with us, from Paradille’s perspective. Though they would have a difficult time turning the tide on Scheutz alone, with Missian’s help, it would not be beyond the realm of possibility. The abundance of Missian’s harvests gives us another means of influence as well—we have plenty of food to offer. Frankly, there are very few downsides to our proposition, and if the duke were a reasonable individual, I don’t believe he would turn us down. However...”

“We’re not dealing with a reasonable man?” I guessed.

“Indeed. It would seem the current duke has a rather limited grasp of the principles of diplomacy. Before their relations worsened, Scheutz was making an effort to ally with Paradille. Such a pact would have enabled Scheutz’s military to pass through Paradille to the other duchies, allowing them easy access to the entire continent. Paradille is staunch in their policy of not allowing other duchies access to their healing magistone, and it’s hard to believe an alliance with Scheutz would have led to a change in that policy, but if Scheutz were to fight alongside Paradille’s forces, it wouldn’t have made a difference. The alliance seemed almost too good to be true, and Scheutz pursued it with fervor, but talks fell apart on account of Paradille’s duke. It seems he decided that the alliance would be to Paradille’s detriment for rather emotionally-driven reasons. Considering Paradille has nothing to gain from a conflict with Scheutz, I would not hesitate to call that attempt at diplomacy a catastrophic failure.”

So he’s the sort of ruler who lets his emotions get the better of him?

I had a bad feeling that could spell doom for our negotiations as well, since he was already predisposed to loathe Missian.

“Furthermore, the duke is not the only one who bears Missian ill will. The people of Paradille hold us in just as low esteem. I fear that even if they were to

send troops to support our cause, those troops would be fighting with very low morale,” said Robinson. With that, the report from his spy was settled and we were ready to move along. “Now then—after taking into account the information that I have shared, I would like to discuss our options.”

“What can we offer them in exchange for their cooperation against Vasmarque?”

“Gold, food, various other resources, and military aid. In short, we have the means to resolve the majority of the problems Paradille is facing.”

Judging by that phrasing, I got the impression that Robinson was prepared to offer a very generous reward for Paradille’s help. With that many bargaining chips on our side, you’d think the alliance was already a done deal, but if the duke was that liable to govern based on his emotions and whims, I knew it might not be enough.

“How about we spread a rumor that Vasmarque intends to ally with Scheutz and invade Paradille once he unites Missian?” I suggested. “It’s a plausible move for him to make, so we wouldn’t be lying, and since we have some time before the negotiations start, we should be able to lay the groundwork.”

“Interesting... That would incentivize Paradille to ensure Vasmarque does not gain control of Missian, yes,” said Robinson. “And you’re right, I believe we have ample time to spread such a rumor. That said, there’s a real possibility that the duke will not consider a mere rumor worthy of his consideration. But then again, there’s no harm in trying...”

He had a point—that alone wouldn’t be enough to ensure the negotiations’ success.

“What do you think, Lady Licia?” I asked, turning to face her.

“Hmm...” Licia paused for a moment to consider the matter. “I’m afraid that no matter how many benefits our alliance may offer them, I doubt Paradille will accept. We lack the single most important factor that a successful negotiation requires.”

“And that is...?”

“Trust. If Paradille is operating under the assumption that we will not keep our promises, then no amount of food, money, or reinforcements will sway them. And even if we spread rumors that Vasmarque intends to invade Paradille, I fear that the duke will be inclined to assume that Lord Couran would do the same. If he does, such rumors would gain us nothing.”

“Can’t argue with that. But doesn’t that leave us at a standstill? How are we supposed to gain their trust?”

We didn’t have an excess of time before the negotiations were set to begin, so dispelling years of distrust in that short period seemed like a pretty tall order, if not downright impossible. This was a deep-seated grudge we were dealing with, and it wasn’t the sort one could wave away as a minor misunderstanding. Were the negotiations doomed from the very beginning? I knew Vasmarque had abandoned the idea of getting Paradille on his side, but had he been right to give up?

“That is the question indeed. Being as His Majesty the Emperor has agreed to mediate, I don’t believe that regaining Paradille’s trust is entirely impossible. It will require no small amount of groundwork before the negotiations begin, however.”

“What sort of groundwork?”

Licia leaned forward and began explaining the particulars of her plan. “In

essence, I believe that if the duke can be convinced that Lord Couran's loyalty to His Majesty is genuine, he will accept that Lord Couran will honor the terms of our agreement."

"And how, specifically, will we convince the duke that Lord Couran is loyal?" asked Robinson.

"I believe we should establish a line of contact with one of the duke's chief retainers. I do not believe that every last member of Paradille's government will stand in opposition to these negotiations. Why, I would be surprised if there isn't at least one among their number who will advocate for an alliance with Missian. If we can convince that person that Lord Rengue and Lord Couran hold the deepest loyalty toward His Majesty and the empire, then they may be able to convince the duke in a manner that we never could. Moreover, we know that the Imperial House and the ruling House of Paradille share a close relationship, and are at least somewhat aware of each other's internal affairs. If we can convince someone from the Imperial House to make contact in our stead, we will have a much easier time carrying out these preparations."

So we'd be getting at the Duke of Paradille by way of one of his retainers, and getting at that retainer by convincing someone on the Imperial side to do it for us. The duke *did* seem to trust information that came from the emperor. The question, of course, was whether or not anyone on the imperial side of the equation would hear us out. Considering that they were the ones enabling the negotiations, they'd likely be inclined to facilitate their success, if for no other reason than the promise of more gold. Robinson's declaration of Couran's loyalty during the last round of talks might have worked in our favor, I reasoned—after all, the imperials would be under the impression that Couran ruling over Missian was an easier situation to deal with than if Vasmarque took control.

“That strikes me as a reasonable proposal,” said Robinson. “However, I don’t believe that the duke is so naïve as to trust that sort of information unconditionally, even if it does come to him by way of the emperor himself. He will take steps to verify whether or not Lord Rengue’s supposed loyalty is a fabrication. As such, we would have to take steps to ensure that ample proof of Lord Rengue’s loyalty makes its way into the duke’s hands.”

“Agreed,” said Licia. “Any claim we make will need proof to substantiate it. But if this plan were to succeed, I believe it would surely sway the duke in favor of approving our alliance. Of course, the most important factor is and will remain our eloquence and ability to respond to the duke’s questions and claims during the negotiations themselves.”

In other words, the success or failure of our plan would hinge on Rengue and the rest of the negotiation team’s ability to make themselves seem trustworthy. Unfortunately, I had a feeling that would be the hardest obstacle of all to surmount.

Then again, I’m sure Robinson will be able to pull us through.

“I believe that will do for tonight,” said Robinson. “I thank the both of you for your most valuable perspectives. I shall speak with my contacts in the emperor’s employ, and if I find they cannot be swayed to help us, we can come up with a different plan.”

Thus, the evening’s strategy meeting came to a close.

A few days later, Robinson succeeded in convincing someone in the emperor’s circle to help us. It seemed they had already sent a message to the Duke of Paradille asking him to participate in talks with Missian, but his reply had been less than encouraging, asking for some time to consider the matter and promising nothing—not even that he would hear us out. Robinson

convinced them to send a new message, though, and this time not to the duke, but to a prominent noble in Paradille: the Lord of House Staured. Said lord was very close with the duke, and was one of the few people who the duke trusted. Lord Staured also had connections with the Imperial House, so he seemed like the perfect individual to use as a proxy.

The messenger returned about ten days later with a response from Lord Staured, indicating he was willing to attempt to persuade the duke to speak with us. In the meantime, Rengue had begun taking action to prove his loyalty to the emperor. Specifically, he'd taken to flying into fits of rage whenever anyone badmouthed the emperor in his presence, which happened often when out and about in the capital. He'd also made a point of loudly discussing how talented the Imperial House was at policy-making, how incredible it was that they'd ruled over the empire for so long, and how disrespecting them was downright treasonous every time he and Robinson ate out.

There was no telling when one of the emperor's people might be watching Rengue, so he was forced to keep up the act at all times, and it wasn't long before it started taking a toll on the poor man's nerves. It didn't help that he wasn't an exceptional actor, to say the least—I was worried that nobody would believe he was being sincere.

A few days after the message from Lord Staured arrived, another message from the Duke of Paradille came, in which he stated that he'd be willing to take part in the negotiations. Rather than inviting us to Paradille, he said that he would be traveling to the capital himself. That wasn't what I'd expected, but on further consideration, it made sense—he may have felt that since the emperor's representatives would be mediating, it would be disrespectful to ask them to travel.

A few days after the message came in, the duke's retinue arrived in the capital and made their way to the castle. We wouldn't begin the talks right away, it seemed—the first day we'd just exchange greetings and attend a welcome party. The negotiations would begin in earnest the day after. I wanted to get this deal hashed out as soon as possible, but building a foundation of friendship would raise the odds of the negotiations proving successful, which seemed to be the purpose of the whole thing.

When we met the Duke of Paradille, we did so in the presence of the emperor.

"I have come in response to His Majesty the Emperor's summons. I am Mahkfa Sarcassia, Duke of Paradille," said the duke. He was a middle-aged man with a very no-nonsense sort of look on his face, which was well-proportioned in a way that made me imagine he'd been quite handsome in his prime. If I had to guess, I'd have put his age somewhere around forty or so, but I knew an appraisal would sort that question out.

Mahkfa Sarcassia

Age: 52

Male

Status:

LEA: 78/79

VAL: 88/88

INT: 66/66

POL: 70/71

Ambition: 33

Aptitudes:

Infantry: A

Cavalry: A

Archer: C

Mage: D

Fortification: B

Weaponry: C

Naval: D

Aerial: B

Strategy: C

His stats weren't bad, but they also didn't mark him as exceptional. He was also quite a bit older than he looked. A few of Mahkfa's retainers were standing behind him, and I appraised all of them as well, for good measure. Most of them had high Valor, which led me to assume Paradille appointed the strong to positions of importance. Valor aside, though, they didn't strike me as very remarkable, either.

One man, however, was an exception. His stats were rather astonishing, even though he was short, plain, and stood at the back of their formation. The man's

status window looked like this:

Bamba Phanamahmaf
Age: 22
Male
Status:
LEA: 70/92
VAL: 52/69
INT: 83/100
POL: 84/98
Ambition: 11
Aptitudes:
Infantry: C
Cavalry: B
Archer: B
Mage: B
Fortification: D
Weaponry: S
Naval: D
Aerial: D
Strategy: S

Unlike his fellow retainers, his stats were high *except* for his Valor. He hadn't fulfilled his true potential yet, but his ability caps were high enough that if he did, he could make something of himself. Still, considering his position in the duke's procession and his forgettable appearance, I had a feeling I was the only one who'd realized how much potential he had. I decided to pay special attention to Bamba, knowing that if I didn't take caution with him, he could pose serious problems for us.

After the emperor greeted Mahkfa, it was Rengue's turn to exchange pleasantries with the duke. The two of them were quick and to the point with the process—they were polite enough, but I could tell there was a degree of lip service going down. Paradille's language, I noted, was indistinguishable from Missian's. It seemed Ansel, Missian, and Paradille all spoke a similar dialect. Scheutz's and Seitz's dialects, in contrast, were apparently a lot different.

Once all the formalities were out of the way, the evening's main event began: a catered party intended to deepen the bonds of friendship between everyone present. The emperor wasn't expected to dine with lower nobility and made an early exit. Rengue, Shahkma, Mahkfa, Robinson, and the others, however, all dined at the same table. I, meanwhile, made a point of seeking out Bamba. I was always curious about people as talented as him, and I wanted to hear what he thought about the upcoming negotiations. I eventually found him eating alone in a corner of the room.

"May I join you?" I asked as I walked up to him.

"Youngling..." muttered Bamba as he glanced up at me. "You'd do well to keep your distance from me. There's no telling when the seal of darkness inscribed upon my right hand may lash out at you."

Did he just say "seal of darkness," or did I mishear him?

That was a term I hadn't heard thrown about before, so I decided to dig a little deeper.

"I'm sorry, I'm not sure I follow. What exactly is a 'seal of darkness'?"

"No sooner had I been born than a devil laid its curse upon me, carving its seal into my flesh and soul—*that* is the seal of darkness," replied Bamba. "Should it come undone, it will transform me into a devilish form, to run rampant and

destroy all around me...”

What? Like, seriously, what? Since when did this world have devils, or any of this other stuff, for that matter?

Granted, this world did have magic and plenty of creatures unlike anything on Earth, but devils seemed a step too far for me to accept. Something felt off about all this.

“May I take a look at this ‘seal’ of yours?” I asked.

“So you’re interested, youngling...?” Bamba said, then showed me the back of his right hand, where I saw a mark shaped like a skull. That mark, however, was smudged in several places. It was obvious that he’d drawn it himself with some kind of ink.

“Your, uh, ‘seal’ is a bit smudged.”

“Huh?” Bamba blinked, then looked at the back of his hand. “Gah! Hell’s bells! D-Do you have any ink on hand?”

“I’m afraid I don’t. So, umm...I take it you drew that yourself?”

“Huh? Oh, n-no, of course not...! Ahem! Worry not, youngling. Today is a day of balance—a day when the seal is calm. That’s why it looks a little smudged,” he explained, making stuff up on the spot.

I was astonished. As best as I could tell, I was dealing with a genuine, hardcore edgelord. Back in my old world, most people who went through that sort of phase did so in their early teenage years, but this guy was twenty-two! I had to wonder if something about society here resulted in people succumbing to their cringiest instincts later on in life. That, or this particular guy had just always been like this.

But those stats...

I felt the need to give him another appraisal just to make sure I hadn't been seeing things, and no, he really did seem to have remarkable abilities. I started wondering if my power might have been on the fritz and decided to talk to him some more to figure out what his deal was.

"So...my name is Ars Louvent," I said, trying to restart the conversation.

"And most call me Bamba Phanamahmaf," replied Bamba. "I see, then—so *you* are Ars Louvent..."

"Huh? Have you heard of me somewhere?" I asked, a little taken aback. Could it be that my power had gained me a degree of notoriety?

"No, not at all. This is the first time I've heard the name."

"...Okay. Right. So, why did you make it sound like you already knew me?"

"Because putting it that way gives the statement a certain *gravitas*," explained Bamba.

That settles it. He's useless.

I spent a little longer talking with him, but all I took away from the conversation was that he was an enormous weirdo, so I decided that it was time to abandon all subtlety and just ask him what I wanted to know.

"So, Sir Bamba, what are your thoughts regarding the negotiations that are about to unfold?"

"Hmm—well, we can't trust anything your boss tells us, especially not the part about him being loyal to the emperor."

"Why would you say that?"

"Well, setting aside this Rengue Salemakhia fellow, his father Couran is known to be a capable commander and a man of great accomplishments. It's very hard

to believe that a man such as him would feel heartfelt loyalty toward the current emperor. Great men only bear true loyalty toward men as great or greater than they are,” Bamba explained, throwing the emperor under the bus in the process.

“But Lord Mahkfa has sworn his loyalty to the emperor, hasn’t he?” I pointed out.

“His lordship has his fair share of eccentricities,” said Bamba, which had horrifying implications. What would it take to make a man like him describe someone as eccentric? It looked like Mahkfa and Rengue were having an ordinary conversation to me, at least. “That said, there’s plenty to be suspicious of, but there are also plenty of advantages to forging a pact with your side. We’ll just have to dig deeper on a couple of matters first.”

“What matters would those be?”

“Not for your ears—for the moment, at least.”

It seemed, then, that he was planning on grilling us once the negotiations kicked off. I still wasn’t quite sure if he was capable or not, but I was convinced that he was a man I’d have to keep a close eye on.

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The next day, the negotiations began in earnest. They would transpire under the watchful eye of the emperor himself, where those who had sworn loyalty toward him would, in theory, not dare attempt to deceive the other party. We were operating under the hope that Licia wouldn’t have to be an active participant, but she’d come along just in case things went south.

The talks started simply enough: Rengue stated for the record what Couran wanted from the Duke of Paradille, and what Missian could offer him in exchange. I noticed a shift in Mahkfa's expression as Rengue laid out our terms—they were, after all, rather generous. Mahkfa asked a few questions, which Rengue answered with practiced ease. By all appearances, the process was going quite well.

Just when I thought we might earn that alliance with a lot less trouble than I'd anticipated, Bamba, the man I'd met at the party the night before, raised his hand.

"With permission, I would like to ask a question of Lord Rengue," he said in a completely different tone than the one he'd used the night before. Gone were the flowery, half-baked metaphors and blunt frankness—this time, he spoke with grace and level-headed consideration. I was shocked to realize that the man could tone it down when the need arose.

"And you are?" asked Rengue.

"Bamba Phanamahmaf, at your service. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Your Lordship," said Bamba, his manners impeccable. His attitude had shifted so dramatically that I was starting to wonder if everything I'd heard the night before had been a hallucination.

"And your question?"

"We have received word that you and your father, Lord Couran, claim a remarkable degree of loyalty toward His Majesty the Emperor. If I may be frank, however, I cannot help but harbor doubts as to the veracity of those claims."

"No need for doubts. The rumors are true."

"Alas, Your Lordship, I am afraid we are left with little choice but to question a

claim so bold. Once, when Rofeille raised its standard in rebellion, Lord Mahkfa was the only duke in the land to rally his troops in defense of the emperor you supposedly serve. Much as I've thought through the circumstances, I cannot for the life of me imagine any reason why Missian would have been unable to do the same."

At that point, Robinson stepped in to offer his defense—the same defense he'd used when Shakhma raised the same objection. Bamba smiled.

"I see. So the previous duke and Vasmarque are alike in their opposition to imperial rule, while Lord Couran holds true to his vows. I am afraid, however, that there still remain some details that do not add up. If Lord Couran were truly so fervently loyal, would he not have disregarded his father's orders and rode out in support of the emperor alone, if need be? I've reviewed the records of the conflict, and I could not help but notice no account of anyone matching Lord Couran's description arriving to reinforce His Majesty's army."

For just a moment, Robinson paused.

"Lord Couran was still young at the time, and was not yet a warrior of the renown he boasts today," he eventually explained. "He was in no position to support an army."

"Is that so? Nevertheless, I cannot help but think that if he were *truly* as loyal as you claimed, he would have rushed to the front to do his part regardless. I certainly would, were I in the same position. I'm afraid I have no choice but to conclude that for all his pretense of loyalty, at heart, he felt the need to prioritize his own safety over that of the man he serves."

"Lord Couran is a man of remarkable intellect," said Robinson. "And he is well-aware of his own station and limitations. As the successor to his father's domain, he bears a great deal of responsibility upon his shoulders, and he

knows that his demise would spell disaster for the land House Salemakhia rules over. It was only after extensive thought that he chose to remain in Missian, and he did so with the greatest of reluctance.”

“Oh, but your words merely prove my point,” Bamba countered. “The way I see it, a willingness to cast rationality aside in favor of the one you serve is the mark of true loyalty.”

“That is your personal opinion, and one that you’ll find is far from universal. Lord Couran believed that rather than ride out on his own, he could serve the emperor better by remaining in Missian and petitioning his father to change his mind. The fact that his efforts proved unsuccessful is a tragedy, but such is the way of things.”

Bamba’s interrogation continued for some time, and Robinson matched him question for question. I was sure that most of his replies were outright lies, so I found myself both impressed by how capable he was at twisting the truth and also struck with the realization that I’d do well not to trust him.

“Hmm,” Bamba eventually said, turning to Rengue. “Might I ask, Lord Rengue, whether you profess the same loyalty to His Majesty that your father claims?”

“Of course,” said Robinson. “Lord Rengue is as loyal and devoted as—”

“I’m afraid, Sir Robinson, that I was addressing His Lordship personally,” interjected Bamba, cutting Robinson off. “Being as he is in attendance, I would very much like to hear him express his intentions in his own words.”

It seemed he’d determined that Robinson was unlikely to slip up, and had shifted his attention to Robinson’s less eloquent superior.

Rengue, of course, asserted his loyalty as well, but Bamba cocked his head and asked, “Is that truly so? I consider the information that I obtain for myself

to be what is most trustworthy, and I have done no small amount of digging to determine where your loyalties lie.”

Rengue hesitated. He was shaken by Bamba’s words. He’d done his best to put on a pretense of loyalty toward the emperor, but it seemed he knew his act was less than foolproof.

“I trust, Lord Rengue, that you are aware of the consequences that will befall you should you choose to lie before His Majesty?” Bamba pressed, his tone taking on a threatening edge.

“Lord Rengue—”

“I am *speaking* with Lord Rengue and would ask that you hold your tongue!” snapped Bamba, cutting Robinson off once more as he tried to come to Rengue’s defense.

Rengue was panicking. From what I could tell, he had no idea what to say. From a calm and detached perspective, Bamba had nothing in the way of conclusive evidence to disprove Rengue’s loyalty—or at the very least, if he did have evidence, he did not have it on hand. For all we knew, the most he had were rumors and hearsay. My best guess was that Bamba was dialing up the pressure because he didn’t know the truth, and was testing Rengue to see whether he had a guilty conscience.

When all was said and done, all that Rengue had to do was confidently declare his loyalty, and we’d be out of the woods. But he didn’t—couldn’t—and the longer he spent waffling, the more suspicious he appeared. Robinson was at a loss, which meant that if anyone was going to save Rengue, it would have to be me. But what could I do?

An idea struck me at just the moment I needed it. I decided to jump into the

conversation and do my best to turn the situation around.

“If I may, it seems quite evident that you harbor doubts regarding Lord Rengue’s loyalty. Might I ask what it is that has made you so very suspicious?”

“Our suspicions are a matter of necessity,” replied Bamba. “Our ability to trust your word is contingent upon the assurance that you would not dare to lie in front of His Majesty, and one who has not sworn loyalty to him wouldn’t dare to bear such compunctions.”

“From my point of view, all citizens of Summerforth owe His Majesty their loyalty,” I countered. “Frankly, I can’t understand why you’re being so insistent. Unless you’re projecting, perhaps? Tell me, are you predisposed to see disloyalty in others on account of your own lack of faith in the empire?”

My goal was to disrupt Bamba’s momentum by turning his accusations back on him.

“*Frankly*, I am offended,” said Bamba. “On what basis do you dare accuse us of disloyalty?”

“None. However, I believe you have failed to consider the implications of your persistent line of questioning. The way you’ve chosen to press this issue almost makes it seem like you have very little faith in His Majesty’s ability to gain and maintain the loyalty of his followers.”

Bamba opened his mouth, ready to refute my point, but before he could get the chance, Mahkfa spoke up instead.

“Well put. Let us move on, Bamba. Any further discussion of this matter would be disrespectful toward His Majesty.”

Bamba did as he was told, albeit reluctantly. I’d known that my argument was flimsy even as I delivered it, but it had somehow carried us through the crisis.

After that point, Rengue either managed to calm down or had received instructions from Robinson while I was the center of attention. One way or another, he managed to declare his loyalty in unambiguous terms, which nobody moved to question. After that, a formal document was drawn up that Rengue, Mahkfa, and Shakhma (acting on behalf of the emperor) applied their personal seals to. The emperor's seal made it official: under his mediation, our negotiations had concluded, and Paradille would be obligated to come to our aid against Vasmarque.

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"You have my sincerest gratitude, Lord Ars. We were in a precarious situation, but your help pulled us through," said Robinson after the negotiations concluded.

"I was just speaking off the cuff. I'm glad to have been of service, though," I replied. I meant it, too—I'd thought that bringing Licia along would end up being the extent of my contributions, so the fact that I'd managed to pitch in felt nice.

"Thank you as well, Lady Licia. Your suggestion to make Lord Rengue's loyalty to the emperor known in advance proved to be quite an asset. I must admit that if I'd come here on my own, the talks would not have ended this favorably," Robinson continued, then paused to breathe a sigh of relief. "I'm just glad that Paradille has accepted our terms. This will turn the tide in our favor, without question."

"We'll be negotiating with Seitz next, right?" I asked.

"Oh, of course—regarding your next step, Lord Couran has instructed that if

the negotiations with Paradille proved successful, the two of you should be sent back to Missian while I proceed to Seitz.”

“He did?”

“Indeed. It seems Seitz’s domestic affairs have taken a turn for the worse. The situation within the duchy is turbulent enough that they won’t have any troops to spare. I’m only going to confirm the state of things in person.”

I’d known that Seitz was on somewhat shaky ground, but I hadn’t expected things to go south at such a convenient time. It struck me that Couran was a very lucky man, considering this meant Vasmarque’s most plausible source of reinforcements was off the table. I’d always heard that fortune played just as vital of a role as skill when it came to war, and I was starting to understand how true that was. Right now, it felt like Couran stood a good chance of coming out ahead in this war.

Our preparations to begin the trip home were already complete, but since I still had to make contact with Shin, I asked to for some more time. Then, I started by visiting the address he’d given me. My plan was to meet him and tell him that we were ready to depart for Missian whenever he was finished with his own preparations.

“Already done over here! I’m good to go any time,” said Shin without hesitation. I’d more or less expected him to be ahead of the game, and it seemed I was right.

“Good! Then it’s time for us to depart. For formality’s sake, allow me to reintroduce myself: I am Ars Louvent, Baron of Lamberg. I hope to make our relationship a mutually beneficial one.”

“Same to you,” said Shin. We shook hands, then set out to finish our final

preparations.

I just had a little shopping left to do, personally. Rosell had asked me to bring something back for him, so I was doing some last-second souvenir hunting. I would've felt bad about only buying something for him, so I decided to get stuff for Rietz and the rest of my retainers as well. I didn't fuss too much over prices—I just picked out something that each of them would appreciate.

Once I'd finished my souvenir shopping, we boarded our boat and set sail for Semplar. Robinson remained in the capital on his own. It seemed he'd be traveling to Seitz by land, which would make for a quicker journey overall.

The voyage to Semplar was no faster or slower than it had been on the way to the capital, and we arrived without incident. Many of Couran's retainers were waiting for us at the docks when we landed. They informed me that Couran was pleased with our efforts, and wished to meet at our soonest convenience. Rengue, Teknado, Licia, and I all set off to see him, while Charlotte and Shin retired to another chamber in the castle.

When we met with Couran, he began by thanking, congratulating, and rewarding Rengue and Teknado for their efforts. Rengue looked absolutely giddy throughout the whole process, and I got the sense that he wasn't used to receiving his father's praise.

After he finished with them, Couran turned to me and Licia.

"It is good to see both of you again as well. I've been told that you played quite an active role in the negotiations' success, and I would like to reward you accordingly."

I didn't think that I'd done much at all. Sure, I pulled Licia into the proceedings, which was at least some sort of accomplishment, but that wasn't a

big deal. Still, I wasn't about to turn down a reward. In the end, Couran presented both of us with a hundred gold coins each as thanks for our efforts.

"I hope to continue to be of service to you, Your Lordship," I said as I accepted the reward.

"I'll be holding you to those words. Thanks to your success, we now have the upper hand. You may have heard that our assault upon the County of Alpharda has already begun, but frankly, it hasn't been going well thus far. Vasmarque's surprise attacks have claimed many strategic locations that we've been unable to reclaim—as things stand, our prospects are grim. With Paradille on our side, however, the tables are sure to turn!"

My main takeaway from this new information was that as things stood, the war was very much not progressing in our favor.

Couran soon dismissed Rengue, Teknado, and Licia, but asked that I stay behind for a moment.

"I have a favor to ask of you," he said as soon as the others had left.

"What favor would that be?"

"I would like you to deliver this letter to Lumeire," Couran explained, passing me a note. "It contains instructions on his deployment. I have withdrawn my troops from Alpharda. Once Paradille's assault on Arcantez has begun, the chance of Alpharda being attacked will diminish, even if it is only defended by a small unit. We shall amass our forces and bring their full might down on our enemies. I've received word from Paradille that they intend to commence their attack on the twentieth day of the fourth month, so we will time our advance to coincide with theirs."

It was currently the nineteenth day of the third month, meaning that the

attack would commence almost one month from now.

“At the moment, Lumeire is under orders to bolster Missian’s defenses in anticipation of an attack from Seitz,” Couran continued. “But with Seitz in a state of chaos, an attack of that nature seems less than likely. Lowering our guard on the border with Seitz to bolster our main attacking force should not pose any troubles in the long term. I intend to have Lumeire lead Canarre’s forces to Semplar, and I would ask that you march with him.”

“Understood,” I replied. It seemed the time had come: I would be participating in my first military campaign. The thought made me a little nervous.

Just one month from now, I’ll be going into battle...

“I have high hopes for what you and yours will contribute on the battlefield. Though, if all goes as planned, Alpharda will fall in short order.”

“I’ll do my best to live up to your expectations.”

With that, my private audience with Couran came to an end.

The war had already started, but with Paradille’s involvement and Missian’s troops being called into battle, it felt to me like it was only just now getting into full swing. Canarre had a large population compared to the other counties in Missian, so the fact that we would be involved implied that this was going to be a large-scale battle—and the bigger the battle, the more people would wind up dead.

I started to get cold feet, but shook my head and slapped my cheeks to snap myself out of it. I was a baron, and that meant I was in no position to let myself be scared of combat. I’d be disgracing my father’s legacy if I let that sort of cowardice show!

Soon after, we set off on the final leg of our trip back to Canarre. I planned on stopping by Lamberg before delivering Couran's letter to Lumeire, and that was where I'd be seeing Licia off on her journey to Torbequista.

"I trust that you'll keep your promise once the war ends," Licia said to me as we were saying our goodbyes.

By that, she meant the promise that I would marry her when that time came. I was a little shaken by the prospect, but managed to reply, "Of course," without missing a beat.

"Just so you know, if you *break* your promise..." added Licia, her words trailing off ominously.

I gulped, "If I break my promise...?"

A brief silence fell, and eventually, Licia just smiled at me.

"I'll see you soon, Lord Ars!"

"Huh? Oh, right! See you soon."

And then she left without ever clarifying what she'd do to me. Oddly enough, that left me feeling more terrified by the prospect than learning her plans. I wasn't going to break the promise, so there wasn't any need for me to be scared, but I was starting to understand that I'd have to propose the instant the war came to a close, for fear of the consequences. That prospect was pretty terrifying, but I'd have all the time in the world to think about it. For now, I made my way back home.



Meanwhile:



The Lordless Louvent Estate

“Master? I have a question, if you’ve got a moment,” asked Rosell in a rather amiable tone.

Mireille glanced over at him, then rolled her eyes and replied, “Since when was I your master, Rosell? I’m pretty sure I’d remember taking on a disciple.”

“Huh? You mean I can’t call you that...?” said Rosell. He looked like a sad little puppy who’d been abandoned out in the rain, and Mireille had no clue how to react.

Mireille had never been the merciful sort. She could order stunning acts of brutality without batting an eyelash, but for some reason, she just couldn’t seem to muster up her callous side when Rosell was concerned. Something about him was just so tragic, so frail, and whenever he looked at her like that, her deepest instincts started screaming that she could *not* allow this sad little pipsqueak to come to harm.

In the end, she sighed and said, “Y’know what? Whatever. Knock yourself out,” accepting him as her apprentice in the process.

All traces of sadness vanished from Rosell’s face in the blink of an eye.

“I will! Thank you!”

Mireille just rolled her eyes again, unable to understand why he was dead set on being her apprentice. She knew that what’s done is done, though, and took the time to answer his question. Rosell’s capacity for learning was remarkable, and she was stunned every time he demonstrated it. Mireille had always prided herself on her intelligence, but clearly, the kid’s mind was just made of different stuff.

Mireille and Rosell spent time studying together before adjourning for a break.

“Come to think of it, I wonder when Ars will be getting back?” muttered Rosell. Ars had departed from Lamberg to journey to the capital several weeks ago.

“Not for a while, I bet. The capital’s not exactly a quick stroll away from here. I just hope he doesn’t get himself killed out there.”

“I know what you mean, but he’s not the only one I’m worried about...”

At that moment, Rietz stepped into the room and asked, “Hm? Am I interrupting your studies?”

“Oh, no, not at all! I was just asking my master a few questions.”

Mireille, meanwhile, muttered, “Speak of the devil,” under her breath, just quiet enough that Rietz couldn’t hear her.

“I’m taking a break at the moment. We were just chatting.”

“Chatting with Mireille...?” said Rietz with a skeptical glance at Rosell’s newfound master. “I hope you haven’t been teaching him anything untoward.”

“You and your unfounded accusations!” countered Mireille.

“Th-That’s right! She hasn’t been teaching me anything bad at all!”

“Then what *have* the two of you been discussing?” asked Rietz, still skeptical.

“We, umm,” Rosell began, then floundered. At just that moment, however, a pair of servants passed behind Rietz, gossiping loudly enough to be overheard.

“Come to think of it, I’m surprised Lord Ars isn’t home yet!” said one.

“The estate sure feels empty without him, doesn’t it?” agreed the other.

Oh. Oh, no, Rosell thought with a wince, then glanced back over at Rietz. His expression had been neutral up until a moment ago, but the second the servants’ words reached his ears, Rietz began to tremble.

“L-Lord Ars... He still isn’t back yet...? But why...?” Rietz muttered. “Could something have gone wrong...? Maybe he’s in danger, and if he is...th-this is no time for me to be standing around! I have to hurry to Lord Ars’s side!”

“M-Mr. Rietz, no!” shouted Rosell as he leaped forward, grabbing Rietz by the arm the second before he lost his composure and dashed out of the estate.

“Un-Unhand me, Rosell! I have to find Lord Ars!” Rietz wailed.

“Ars tasked you with watching over his estate, didn’t he?! He can take care of himself! He’ll be fine!”

“But... But he’s—”

“He’s in the capital! Do you realize how far that is?! You have to learn to have faith in him!” Rosell pleaded. After some time, Rietz seemed to regain his bearings.

This had been a persistent problem since Ars had left on his journey. If Rietz so much as heard his master’s name, he broke down in fits of worry. Rietz had borne an incredibly strong sense of loyalty toward Ars and internalized the idea that it was his job to protect him from any and all potential threats. This, it turned out, meant that when Rietz wasn’t capable of protecting Ars—or, for that matter, knowing if he was being threatened—his imagination ran wild and he had to be restrained, a task which fell upon the shoulders of Rosell and House Louvent’s servants. Rosell had been in a near-constant state of worry that someday he’d be too late and Rietz would vanish into the wilderness, rushing to

Ars's side, common sense be damned.



“Yes... Yes, you’re right... I have to believe in him... I have to be here to welcome him back when he returns home!” he declared, returning to his usual self.

Rosell took one last look at Rietz to make sure he wouldn’t relapse, then heaved a sigh of relief. Nobody had worked harder than Rietz since Ars had left, and at this point, the Louvent estate could hardly function without him.

Mireille watched as Rietz went on his way to take care of some menial task or other.

“That guy sure takes his job seriously, huh?” she said as she stifled a yawn. “Okay, that’s enough studying for today. I’ve got a bottle with my name on it.”

“Aww,” Rosell whined as Mireille stood up and waltzed out of the room without another word.

Unfortunately for her, Rietz was still close at hand and happened to see her leave.

“Hm? Are you finished with your studies? In that case, do you think you could lend me a hand?”

Mireille didn’t curse out loud, but considering the look that crossed her face, her feelings on this development were apparent. She knew that when Rietz asked for a favor, the odds of it being a massive chore were high. And if she told him she was off to find herself a drink, he would force her to help him instead.

“It just so happens that I’ve made plans to train the troops out in the yard today, and I’d appreciate your help,” Rietz continued.

“O-Oh, c’mon, I’m sure you can handle a little training session on your own!”

“Perhaps, but an extra pair of hands does wonders for efficiency. And if you’re

not helping Rosell study, I don't imagine you have other plans. You should be free."

This was true, yes. Mireille had been outmaneuvered, but she wasn't about to let herself go down without a fight. She'd get out of that tiresome training session no matter what it took. So, she resorted to desperate measures: turning tail and running as fast as her legs could carry her.

"Hey! Wait!" Rietz shouted, then took off in hot pursuit. Seeing as he was not only faster than Mireille, but also more well-acquainted with the estate's layout, it wasn't much of a chase. He caught her without difficulty, then dragged her off to help with the soldiers' training.

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"Ars still isn't home, huh?" said Kreiz, Ars's younger brother.

"He went to some place called the capital," said Wren, Kreiz's twin sister. The two of them were chatting as they lounged about in their room.

At this particular moment in time, the twins were six. They'd grown considerably over the past few years, both physically and—to an extent, anyway—mentally. They'd even begun devoting themselves to the sort of rudimentary studies most children started with.

Kreiz had also started learning the fundamentals of swordsmanship. Ars had appraised both of them when they were born and had found that Wren had the potential to be remarkably bright, while Kreiz was a master of warfare in the making. The twins had never resembled each other in appearances, and their talents were just as mismatched.

“All right!” shouted Kreiz. “Let’s go play outside! I wanna ask Rietz to teach me how to fight!”

“*Outside?*” huffed Wren. “But playing *inside’s* so much more fun!”

Wren’s sluggishness and Kreiz’s enthusiasm cut a stark contrast with each other. One was a born and bred homebody, while the other was a natural wild child. That was a third manner in which they were opposites.

“Well, fine, then I’m going out on my own!” Kreiz declared, then rushed out the door without even waiting for a response.

“Hey, Kreiz! Wait!” Wren called after him. She didn’t want to go outside, but staying inside on her own would surely be boring, so she chased after him.

The two of them sped down the estate’s hallways until they found Rosell in the dining hall. That was a welcome sight—Rosell often played with the twins. In their eyes, he was kind, knowledgeable, and knew how to tell an excellent story. All in all, the two of them were extremely fond of him. They had, in fact, decided to ask him to play with them again today, but as they rushed into the dining hall, Kreiz skidded to a halt.

“What’s wrong?” Wren asked with a quizzical cock of her head.

“L-Look!” replied Kreiz, pointing across the room—not at Rosell, but past him, toward a woman with long, black hair. It was still the middle of the day, but she already seemed to be partway into a tankard of spirits.

“Hey, Wren—isn’t she...?”

“*M-Mireille,*” Wren whispered in fear.

The twins had yet to speak to the newest arrival at the estate. It wasn’t that they hadn’t had the chance to speak to her, they’d had ample opportunity, but had chosen to avoid her each and every time. Why? Simply put: she scared the

living daylights out of them. Mireille had a sharp glare, a wild and imposing manner, a villainous sneer that got all the worse whenever she laughed, and most of all, an apparent contempt for children. There was nothing about her that would endear her to kids of the twins' age.

They wanted to run over and talk to Rosell, but the fact that he was mid-conversation with their household bogeywoman was a major obstacle, and for a moment, they found themselves at a standstill. Unfortunately for them, it wasn't long before Rosell caught a glimpse of them out of the corner of his eye.

"Oh, Kreiz, Wren! What are you two up to?" he called out.

The twins panicked. This was not going according to plan. Rosell was all smiles as he beckoned them, but they were just too scared to bring themselves to walk over...until Kreiz decided that nobody likes a scaredy cat, mustered up his courage, and strode across the room. Wren wasn't at all excited about the idea, but the invisible pressure exerted by her brother's advance ended up dragging her along for the ride.

"Huh?" grunted Mireille as the twins approached her. "Who're these runts?"

"Wait, you haven't met them? They're Ars's twin siblings, Kreiz and Wren. They're still only six—aren't they adorable?"

"Hmm—the kiddo's siblings, eh...? Wait, you said they're twins? They sure don't look it, huh? Guess it's true that some twins look just the same, and others don't resemble each other at all."

Kreiz and Wren shrank back under the pressure of Mireille's stare, quivering in fear. Rosell, fortunately, picked up on their terror and intervened.

"Master, please, don't scowl at them like that! Look at them, they're terrified!"

“Someone woke up on the rude side of the bed today, huh?” countered Mireille. “I wasn’t scowling, I was just looking at them! *Excuse me* for having a scary face!”

“You could make an effort, at least! Try smiling at them!”

“Yeah, nah, bad idea. Kids don’t like it when I smile.”

“Oh. Oooh,” said Rosell as he pictured one of Mireille’s usual grins and realization dawned. She had a point—a smile like that was liable to scare children away from her.

“But anyway, that’s not even the point,” Mireille continued, pausing to take a swig from her tankard. “I just had Rietz shove his chores off on me, I’m exhausted, and I just sat down to revitalize myself with a nice, stiff drink—why should I have to placate a couple of brats now? You know I hate kids!”

Rosell just gave her the stare of a boy who’d sat through too much of his master’s nonsense. A moment later, a thoughtful look appeared on Mireille’s face.

“Though, hmm... If they’re the kiddo’s little siblings, then it wouldn’t hurt to get in their good graces,” she muttered, then smirked as she looked over at Kreiz and Wren. “All right, get over here, you two! It’s high time the three of us got some bonding in!”

The twins found the sneering grin on her face horrifying and spun around to flee.

“It’s okay!” said Rosell before they could make a break for it. “She’s not as scary as she looks, I promise!”

Rosell was a known factor for the twins, and between their trust in him and the gentleness of his tone, his words got through to them. They timidly

approached and took a seat close to Mireille.

“So, want a sip?” Mireille asked, offering her tankard to the two of them. “It’s the good stuff!”

“You can’t give them alcohol! They’re children!”

“I’m kidding, god! So, you, the boy...Kreiz, I think? You planning on being some sorta warrior when you grow up?”

Kreiz nodded vigorously.

“I-I’m gonna learn to fight and help protect my big brother!”

“Oh? That’s some real resolve for a runt like you. Y’know, you wouldn’t guess it, but I’ve seen my fair share of battles. I’ve got a lot of stories I could tell you, if you wanna lend an ear.”

And so, Mireille began regaling the twins with her war stories. Before they knew it, Kreiz and Wren had forgotten their fear and were hanging onto her every word. She told them about her spectacular exploits on the battlefield and the fearsome strength of her enemies, simple tales that any child could appreciate, at first. As she got deeper into her cups, however, her stories started drifting in a somewhat untoward direction.

She told them, for instance, about a time she caught her foes in a trap and picked them off in a one-sided slaughter, about the particulars of her torture methodology, about how she’d slipped out of an enemy’s trap and dodged death by a hair’s breadth, and about some of the more gruesome ways in which her former allies had met their ends. In short: stories that one should never, ever tell to children for fear of traumatizing them. Kreiz, who it bears repeating was six and thought of war as a spectacular and heroic affair, was shaken to his core and stunned speechless.

“Oh, and then there was this one time—must’ve been when I was twenty or so—anyway, I was up against this real nasty son of a bitch with a whole—”

“M-Master, stop!” wailed Rosell, who just couldn’t take it anymore. “That’s enough! Look what you’ve done to poor Kreiz!”

“Huh?” Mireille paused there and took a look at her audience for the first time since several stories ago. They’d been paying such close attention at the start that she’d assumed they were just listening in enraptured silence. In truth, Kreiz was trembling with abject horror.

“H-Hey, what’s wrong, kid?” asked Mireille. Kreiz, in lieu of an answer, shot to his feet and bolted out of the dining hall in a flash.

“K-Kreiz, wait!” called Wren, who followed along right after him.

Rosell let out a long, weary sigh.

“Those aren’t the sort of stories you should ever tell to a six-year-old, Master.”

“O-Oh. That so? Brats sure are picky about these things, huh?”

That was right around the time that Rietz stepped into the room.

“Did something happen? Master Kreiz and Mistress Wren just dashed past me like they’d seen a ghost!”

Rosell summed up the recent sequence of events, and Rietz turned to Mireille with a look of exhausted disdain on his face.

“Wh-What, you’re blaming me?!” she asked, lashing out preemptively.

“Well, it is your fault,” said Rosell. “And after Ars said that Kreiz had the potential to be a swordsman, too! What are we supposed to do if he ends up too scared of fighting to polish that talent?”

In contrast to Rosell's concern, Rietz just smiled. He'd watched over the twins since their birth, and he knew a thing or two about their personalities.

"No need to worry about that," he said. "Master Kreiz is quite the strong-minded child."

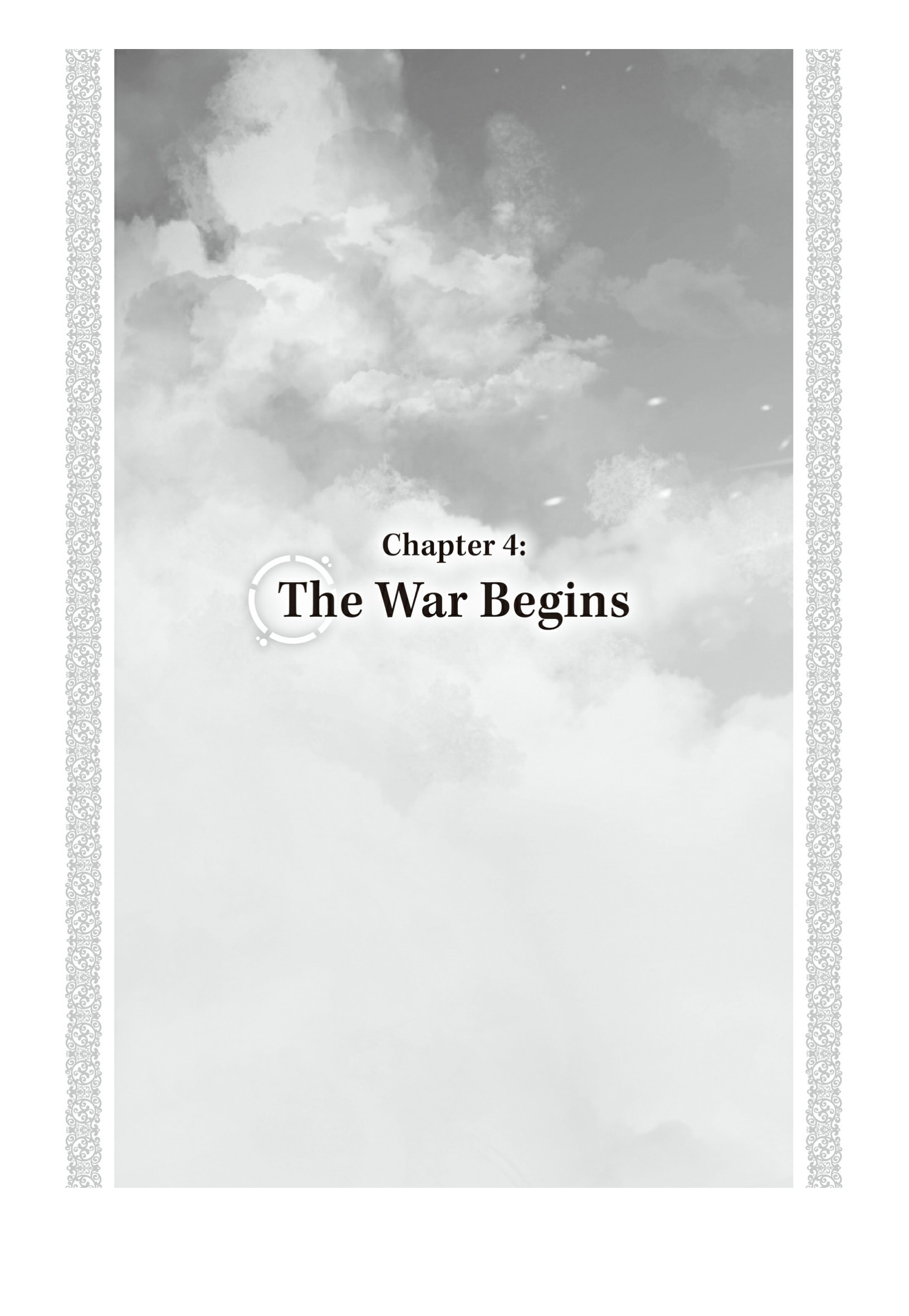
As it turned out, Kreiz's ultimate destination after he heard Mireille's horrific tales was the training grounds. He took up a short practice sword designed for children, then began running through his swordsmanship drills. Wren, meanwhile, took a seat on a nearby stool to watch him.

"Weren't those stories we just heard scary, Kreiz?" she asked.

"Yeah!" Kreiz shouted back as he swung his blade, his expression a portrait of determination. "They were scary, so I have to get stronger! It's the only way I'll be able to protect Ars!"

Wren felt a little impressed as she watched her brother train with such earnest resolve. She thought he was amazing, but at the same time, she felt a lurking sense of danger. Wren was a clever one, and she knew that this could lead to Kreiz getting himself caught up in a real mess.

I'll have to make sure he doesn't take things too far, Wren thought to herself with a nod, promising herself that she'd guide her brother true as she watched him work.



Chapter 4:

The War Begins

“L-Lord Ars! Welcome home!”

No sooner had I stepped into my estate than Rietz sprinted up to me, shouting an enthusiastic welcome. I assumed he’d already been informed of my impending arrival and had been waiting in the entryway to be there the instant I made it back.

“It’s good to be back. And thank you for keeping the place intact in my absence, Rietz.”

“Think nothing of it, Milord. I’m just glad to see you safe and sound! Now then, I’ll have to organize a welcome party at once, and—”

“Wait, wait—no time for a party,” I clarified before Rietz could go overboard. “I know I’ve only just arrived, but I’ll have to leave for Canarre right away.”

“For Canarre? Why?” Rietz asked.

“I have a message to deliver from Lord Couran. I’m planning on setting out tomorrow.”

“I see. Still, even if we don’t have time for a party, we can’t let your homecoming go unacknowledged! I’ll arrange for our dinner tonight to be a lavish one!”

With that, he hurried off to give the news to the cooks who worked at my estate.

“Wow. Rietz didn’t even look at me, did he?” Charlotte grumbled with a pout. “He *completely* ignored me! Talk about rude!”

She wasn’t wrong. In fact, Rietz hadn’t spared her or Shin the slightest of

notice. Considering Shin was a fresh new arrival, the fact that Rietz hadn't seemed to realize he was there was almost impressive.

Just how relieved to see me was he?

Suddenly, a thought struck me: Shin was from the capital, and everything I'd heard suggested that people in the capital were egregiously racist when it came to Malkans. I glanced over at Shin, wondering what he would think of Rietz and his position among my retainers.

"So this is the Louvent estate, eh? Not much to look at, but eh, I knew he was a small-timer. No real surprise there," Shin happened to mutter to himself just then. It seemed he wasn't feeling especially polite at that particular moment, but he also didn't seem to have felt anything in particular about Rietz's appearance. Still, I decided to clear up my newfound doubts.

"So, Shin—you saw that I have a Malkan in my employ. If you have any complaints regarding the matter, now would be the time to air them."

"A Malkan?" Shin blinked. "Oh, yeah, I guess he was, huh? That's pretty rare for a noble house, isn't it? I couldn't give two hoots who you hire as long as you let me build my airship, though. That junk ain't my problem."

I was starting to realize he was an apathetic person when it came to just about everything other than airships.

Soon, I reunited with Rosell and Mireille as well. The two of them seemed to have gotten quite a bit of bonding done while I was out of the house. I spent the afternoon passing out the souvenirs I'd bought for everyone, and when night fell, I was treated to a more luxurious dinner than we'd usually serve. Everyone asked me all sorts of questions while we ate—what the capital was like, what the emperor seemed like, that sort of thing. I, meanwhile, asked if

anything unusual had happened in Lamberg while I was away, and was relieved to hear that nothing had gone wrong in my absence. We hadn't received any new info from the Shadows, either.

The next day I set out for Canarre, Lord Couran's message in hand. I arrived in the early afternoon, made my way to the castle, and was ushered in to meet with Lumeire.

"Ars! Welcome, welcome!" he said as I stepped into the chamber. "I take it your mission from Lord Couran ended without incident?"

"It did, yes. The negotiations were a success."

"Were they? That's wonderful news! Lord Couran will have the upper hand now, no doubt about it!" Lumeire exclaimed. "I'm told you have a message for me—could it be that he's ordered us to set forth?"

"I'm impressed, Lord Lumeire—that's correct," I replied, then handed him the letter.

Lumeire opened it up, gave its contents a read, then nodded.

"Yes, it is as I suspected. There's little chance that Seitz will go on the offensive. That's why the first thing I did after I learned about the turmoil across the border was send word to Lord Couran. To my knowledge, one of Seitz's most powerful noblemen rose against its duke in rebellion, and several other lesser nobles followed his example to stage uprisings of their own. The ruling powers of Seitz are in no position to send their troops over to another duchy, that much is for certain."

This was my first time hearing any of the specifics about what had happened in Seitz. From the sound of things, their duke didn't strike me as the most capable of leaders.

“I intend to amass Canarre’s forces here in Canarre City, then set out for Semplar,” Lumeire informed me. “Today is the first of the fourth month, so I’m not certain that bringing all our men there by the twentieth will be feasible...but in any case, we will do what we can. As for you, Ars, I would like you to return to Lamberg and bring your troops here at once.”

“Understood,” I replied, then hurried on off back to Lamberg without missing a beat.

The moment I got back to my estate, I issued orders for our troops to prepare to march. This time around, I intended to take Rietz, Charlotte, Mireille, and Rosell with me, leaving only Shin behind. He seemed satisfied with that arrangement—apparently, he planned on using the time I was away to hash out any last flaws or tricky details in his airship plans. I was a little worried about how the estate itself would get along in our absence, but some of my servants had been working there since before I was born, so upon further reflection, I figured they’d be able to keep the place running just fine.

At that moment in time, House Louvent’s standing military was two hundred men strong. We’d bolstered our numbers the past several years, but we were still a very small force in the grand scheme of things. Nevertheless, I led my men to Canarre.

We weren’t the first group to arrive in the county’s capital, but we also weren’t the last. That meant we’d be spending some time on standby while we waited for the other lords to assemble, and I decided to use that period to wrap up a bit of outstanding business I had in Canarre. Specifically, I was planning on asking the Shadows to shift their priorities.

I knew that as the war progressed and battles became more frequent, I would feel the need to call upon their services in different ways. It seemed reasonable

to assume that they could be a huge help in securing us a route into an enemy castle we had to capture, for instance. As such, I asked them to withdraw from Arcantez for the time being and scout Velshdt instead. I offered them the same rates I'd been paying for their work in Arcantez and requested that the information they gained be brought to me in Semplar, since I couldn't exactly go gallivanting back to the Tremps every single time they had a report for me. Our meeting place would have to change as time went on, depending on the course the war wound up taking.

Ben, my contact with the Shadows, wasn't present in Canarre at that particular moment. I had a retainer who I'd tasked with accepting all the information that the Shadows brought to us, though, so I entrusted him with the task of informing Ben of my new priorities and requesting that further information be brought to Semplar. I had no way of knowing when they'd show up with my first report, and it was possible that I'd have already moved before that time came, so I told my retainer to hurry off to Semplar the moment my message was delivered and stay there to accept any reports if our timelines didn't mesh.

A few hours after I settled my business with the Shadows, the Lord of Torbequista, Hammond Pleide, arrived at almost the same time as the Lord of Coumeire, Krall Orslow. Torbequista and Coumeire were both larger and more populated territories than Lamberg, so both of them had brought more troops along than I had provided. Of course, "more troops" was relative—Hammond led a force of three hundred and fifty men, while Krall's troops numbered only two hundred and fifty, so my contribution didn't feel too inadequate in comparison. All told, around four thousand soldiers ended up arriving in Canarre City.

When everyone was there, Lumeire stepped up to address us.

“Soldiers of Canarre! You have done well to answer my call,” he cried. “As we speak, the capital of our fair Duchy of Missian, Arcantez, lies in the traitorous hands of a pretender to the throne: Vasmarque! Lord Couran, the true and just ruler of Missian, has requested that we join with his army and reclaim what is rightfully his! We ride to his aid, and we ride to cast Vasmarque out! We shall begin our campaign by occupying the city of Velshdt, which has chosen to side with the enemy. Once Velshdt falls, Arcantez will fall in short order! Soldiers of Missian—today, we march to glory and victory!”

Over four thousand voices rose in an uproarious battle cry. Their shout rang out loud enough that it shook the ground beneath our feet. With that, Lumeire led us out of the city, and our march to Semplar began.

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We arrived in Semplar on the eighteenth of the month, several days after our march began. A tremendous number of soldiers had already gathered in the city by the time we got there. From what I saw, the best estimate was that close to sixty thousand soldiers were present in Semplar, with another ten thousand scheduled to arrive before long. It seemed Couran’s goal of beginning his offensive the day after tomorrow would be met, and if the remaining ten thousand men didn’t arrive for whatever reason, we wouldn’t be pushing back the schedule to wait.

In total, Couran’s army numbered a hundred thousand strong. The thirty thousand soldiers unaccounted for were either defending strategically significant locations or already on the move to retake sites that had been lost to Vasmarque. Even with thirty percent of his troops elsewhere, the sheer scale of

his army astonished me. The thought of all those soldiers going into battle at once had me more nervous than I'd ever been before. Just how large-scale would the battles before me be?

Two days remained until Paradille was scheduled to begin its attack, and I knew that I had to pull myself together. I couldn't humiliate myself in front of my retainers. I had to resolve not to lose heart no matter what horrors I ended up witnessing.

Two days later, on the twentieth, we received word that Paradille had begun its invasion.

"The time has come!" shouted Couran as he addressed his army. "We march upon the County of Alpharda!"

With that command, I and the rest of his massive host began to advance on our first target.

○

"I bring urgent news, Your Lordship! Mahkfa Sarcassia, the Duke of Paradille, has led a force of thirty thousand across the border! They've crossed over into the County of Lund, claimed the city of Menpha with ease, and are advancing upon Castle Lund!"

The report arrived without warning. Vasmarque and his advisors were gathered in Castle Arcantez's Chamber of Debate at the time, engaged in a war council, and the moment he heard the news, Vasmarque's famously unreadable expression let slip a rare hint of displeasure.

Vasmarque's most trusted confidant, Thomas Grunzeon, his tactician, Remus

Ives, and the rest of his advisors sitting at the round table in the chamber's center were all astonished.

"Is this certain? There are no doubts?" Vasmarque asked the soldier who had delivered the message.

"I-I'm afraid so, Your Lordship," replied the soldier. "His movements would suggest that Mahkfa's objective is to make his way here, to Arcantez. Word has it that he's convinced you are an enemy to the emperor, so he's decided to mount a campaign to keep you from rising against him."

"An enemy to the emperor...?" Vasmarque muttered, losing himself in thought. "Well, I suppose he's not entirely mistaken."

Just then, a second soldier burst into the room.

"I come bearing a report, Your Lordship! Couran has sallied forth from Semplar, and has marched into the County of Alpharda with an army over fifty thousand strong! They're making their way toward Castle Kranpless at a rapid pace!"

At that, the room fell into deathly silence. Vasmarque's advisors were capable enough to understand how perilous their situation had become.

"So Couran and Mahkfa have forged an alliance..." Remus mumbled, his brow furrowed. "This spells trouble for our cause—of that, there can be no mistake."

"That's right, and there's no time to waste," added Thomas, who turned to Vasmarque. "What's the situation in Seitz?"

"All contact with Seitz's leadership has ceased since the rebellion began," replied Vasmarque. "I have very little hope they will be able or willing to provide reinforcements."

"Figured as much," Thomas sighed. "Suppose it's our own damn fault for

thinking we could rely on them.”

“For them to have allied with Paradille, however... I can only assume the emperor’s men served as an intermediary,” mused Vasmarque. “Even with imperial backing, it couldn’t have been easy to lure Mahkfa into an alliance...but it wouldn’t have been impossible, either. It seems Couran has managed to betray my expectations.”

“Alas, what’s done is done,” said Remus. “We ought to be thinking of countermeasures, not wallowing in regrets! The enemy aims for Velshdt, of that we can be certain, and if we lose it, we’ll lose all trace of advantage we have left. It’s a small mercy that to take Velshdt, they’ll have to first conquer Alpharda and Samkh.”

“We’ve got about thirty thousand men in and around Velshdt,” added Thomas. “We should assume they’re sending in *all* their troops, not just the ones we’ve seen. Worst case, we could be dealing with somewhere around eighty thousand. I’d love to say we should take this chance to conquer Semplar while it’s undefended, but Paradille’s attack rules that right the hell out. We’ve got the upper hand in terms of numbers, but Paradille’s troops aren’t the type to mess around. If we give them the chance, they’ll sweep in and take our heads before we know it.”

“And if our allies in Alpharda learn how perilous their situation is, they may surrender,” stated Remus. “The Count of Alpharda has always been an opportunist. I’ve little doubt he’ll betray us at the first sign of weakness on our part. Samkh, at least, is led by Your Lordship’s loyal followers. I would not think that they would betray you, but alas, their army is weak, and Castle Samkh is old and decrepit. They will crumble under the slightest pressure.”

Vasmarque, Thomas, and Remus began a heated discussion, analyzing every

last detail of their predicament. Not even the most ardent of optimists could describe their situation as advantageous, and while many ideas were proposed, none seemed to be the masterstroke they needed to save their campaign.

“It seems we’ve no choice,” Remus eventually muttered. “We must find a way to protect Velshdt with what few forces we have available.”

Vasmarque paused for a moment to consider Remus’s words, then nodded to himself.

“Thomas, make your way to Velshdt and take command of their forces. You will be fighting at a disadvantage, but I have faith that your abilities will carry the day. If you buy us the time we need for the rebellion in Seitz to be quelled, the chance for a counterattack will present itself.”

“As you command, Milord,” said Thomas. “I swear to you that I’ll make Couran squeal like the swine he is!”

Vasmarque scrawled a quick letter to the Count of Velshdt, handed it to Thomas, and sent him on his way.

○

Under Couran’s command, we led our troops into the County of Alpharda. The Count of Alpharda maintained his stronghold in a region known as Kranpless. The count had lived in the barony that was Alpharda’s namesake in the past, but had moved his base of operations to Kranpless as a matter of convenience. The relocation of the capital wasn’t enough of a justification to change the cities’ names, so the County of Alpharda was ruled from a seat not located in Alpharda, the city. Incidentally, I’d heard of a few other counties that

had gone through similar processes.

A checkpoint existed on the Alphardan border, but with the size of our army, breaking through was more or less trivial. It wasn't even a fight: the border's guards took one look at Couran's force and surrendered. Alpharda's soldiers, it seemed, weren't much for loyalty—nor, as it turned out, was their count. Partway through our advance on Kranpless, a message from the count arrived, stating his intention to surrender to Couran. Apparently, he'd heard about the size of our army, realized that with Paradille's invasion on Vasmarque's plate, there were no reinforcements coming, and threw in the towel.

The count's surrender was not, however, unconditional. In short, he demanded that he be allowed to maintain his position as Alpharda's ruler. A number of Couran's followers took umbrage to that—why should a man who sided with the enemy be allowed such generous terms, they asked—but the opportunity to take Alpharda without losing a single man was too good to pass up. Plus, refusing his terms would have sent a message to the other counties that offering to surrender wasn't worth the effort. As such, Couran decided to accept the count's deal, and Alpharda fell without any real fight to speak of. After spending so much time steeling my resolve for my first campaign, it felt like a bit of an anticlimax to see the battle end before it even began.

After the fall of Alpharda, Couran ordered for messages to be sent to every other county in the vicinity of Velshdt urging their immediate surrender and stating that those who chose to give up would be allowed to keep their station, as the Count of Alpharda had. It wasn't long before a reply arrived from a county called Muta indicating that they had decided to surrender as well. The armies of Muta and Alpharda totaled around eight thousand, all of whom became a part of our main force.

Not long afterward, Couran called all the prominent nobles within his army together in one of Castle Kranpless's chambers for a war council. I was allowed to attend once more and got to bring Rietz, Mireille, and Rosell with me, though I ended up attracting the same sort of unpleasant attention as I had the first time. Thankfully, everyone who would have been inclined to complain had already gotten that out of their systems during that first council, so we didn't face any direct harassment this time around.

"Now then," said Couran. "Our next objective is the conquest of Samkh. We cannot expect this foe to capitulate as easily as the last, I'm afraid. The Count of Samkh is a cousin of the Count of Velshdt, and their bond is strong. The Count of Velshdt, meanwhile, is Vasmarque's brother-in-law. It's hard to believe that any of them would cast aside their allegiance."

From what I knew, Vasmarque was married to the older sister of the Count of Velshdt.

"With an army our size, the chance of defeat is *less* than one in a million," Couran continued. "However, there is always a possibility that our enemy will prove unexpectedly resourceful, and I have no desire to lose men on account of my complacency. I intend to proceed with caution and ensure my plan of action accounts for all contingencies."

The council began, and Couran's followers started to offer their suggestions. One advocated for a surprise attack, while another noted that while the Count of Samkh would not betray Vasmarque, the same was not true of his retainers. The latter plan was shot down on account of the count's retainers being known for their loyalty, while the former was rejected due to the risks far outweighing the benefits—surprise attacks were a go-to tactic for forces that were outnumbered and fighting at a disadvantage.

“Figuring out what our enemy’s next move will be is vital,” Rosell eventually suggested. “Given the circumstances, I doubt they’ll be aiming to defeat us in battle—no, they’ll be doing their best to stall for time. Although Vasmarque is fighting at a significant disadvantage now, with enough time, Seitz may overcome its internal turmoil and send reinforcements, or Paradille could be forced to retreat, enabling Vasmarque to send backup. I know none of that is certain, but my point is that the tides could turn against us at a moment’s notice.”

“Hmm—perhaps. I can’t say I wouldn’t consider just that, in his position. We may be in a position where we *can* win this war, but we have not won yet. If Vasmarque feels he’s been backed into a corner, he’ll begin plotting to catch us by surprise, or, as you said, he may feel that stalling for time is his best hope,” said Couran. He seemed to agree with Rosell’s line of thought. “As for *how* he’ll stall for time... Given the trends of the era, I imagine he’ll hatch some scheme involving magic.”

“I believe so as well,” replied Rosell. “There are plenty of ways you can set traps with magic, and I think he’ll use them to try to stall our advance.”

I had come to understand that there were a wide variety of trap spells out there. They all tended to operate off a similar principle: you would cast them on a particular location, and they would activate when someone crossed into their area of effect. They weren’t foolproof. One could be trained to spot places that had been trapped, so sending soldiers who had undergone such training to scout an area was common practice.

“I’d go so far as to guess he’s already begun setting traps,” Rosell continued. “We’ll have to proceed with caution to ensure we don’t get caught in them, but the longer we take the more traps he’ll have time to prepare. If we don’t

advance now, at the quickest pace possible, we'll find it difficult to make progress down the line."

"I see," said Couran. "Thankfully, we're more than prepared to deal with trap magic. We shall mobilize the majority of our traphunters and proceed as fast as possible in their wake!"

We went on to discuss the specifics of the plan—who would take point, which route we would travel, and the like—then called the meeting to a close.

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Our invasion of the County of Samkh had begun. As promised, Couran mobilized all of his magical traphunters, and as Rosell predicted, they found and disabled an astonishing number of magical traps in our path. Fortunately, Couran's men were up to the task and our main force was able to proceed unharmed—for the most part, anyway. Unlike in Alpharda, Samkh's rulership had not chosen to roll over and surrender, so we clashed with enemy troops on several occasions, but each time we overcame them with little difficulty and moved along.

"Now then," said Couran, "our next move is to capture Vakmakro. If we succeed there, Samkh will be within our grasp!"

He had called a war council once again, this time to discuss the capture of a key strategic point between us and the county capital. Vakmakro was one of the County of Samkh's major cities, and it was also located near the capital city of Samkh itself. If we wished to conquer Samkh, then the fort that stood in Vakmakro had to fall first.

Though the fort itself wasn't especially well-known, it was still all but guaranteed that the place would be stuffed with magical traps to prevent a direct invasion. Sending a unit to sneak in and disable the traps was too risky, so we were trying to work out a way to take the fort without resorting to that or a frontal assault. Couran had already called for Vakmakro's surrender, to which we'd never received a reply, and the soldiers occupying the fort seemed to be settling in for a drawn-out siege. They were going to do everything they could to delay our march.

"Lumeire!" said Couran. "I want you to lead the assault on Vakmakro."

"Yes, Your Lordship," Lumeire replied with a bow.

Lumeire's the vanguard?

I was part of Lumeire's force, which meant it was time for me to experience a real battle first-hand. The skirmishes up to this point had been quick and easy efforts, so we had yet to see a proper engagement.

"Prepare your men for battle, Ars," Lumeire said to me as we hustled off to get ready for the upcoming assault.

"Understood."

"If we're able to claim Vakmakro without difficulty, we're sure to wind up in Lord Couran's good graces. Tell me, do you have a proposal for how we should carry out the assault?"

"Not...offhand," I replied, caught off-guard by the question. "I'll give it some thought. What about you, Rietz? Do you have any suggestions?"

"Hmm... I'm afraid that without any information on their forces or the fort itself, it would be difficult to formulate a plan."

"The fort's walls aren't particularly tall, and it's not big enough to

accommodate many troops,” said Lumeire. “It seems their magical defenses are lacking, as well.”

“Is that so?” replied Rietz. “In that case, it seems rational to let our mages play a central role in our assault.”

I nodded. We had Charlotte on our side, so if the enemy was unprepared for a magical bombardment, we could hit them where it hurt.

“Out of curiosity, what do you mean when you say their defenses are lacking?” I asked.

“Broadly speaking, you need a mage to defend against a mage,” said Lumeire. “That’s as true in a siege as it is anywhere else, and there are specific spells intended for defending castles. There are also extra-large catalyzers made for that purpose. Without one of those catalyzers, the strength of your magical defenses and the area you can safeguard diminishes. Catalyzers like those take up as much space as a turret in and of themselves—why, we had to remodel a tower in Castle Canarre to install one of them.”

I’d never heard of a catalyzer of that scale. I’d thought there were only three sizes, but it made sense that defending a castle would merit something larger. Thinking back, I remembered that one of Castle Canarre’s towers had some sort of strange writing inscribed onto its walls. I hadn’t made much of it at the time, but knowing what I did now, I had to assume that tower was the catalyzer he was referring to.

“According to our scouts, the fort *does* have a catalyzer tower, but judging by its design, it’s an old and outdated model. I should think that our mages are capable of penetrating its defenses.”

“I see. Fortunately, Charlotte is an exceptional mage. I think she’ll be able to

break through the fort's defenses without issue."

"Very good. I have spared little expense in training my mages...though none of them measure up to Charlotte's reputation, of course! I shall requisition large catalyzers and aqua magia from Lord Couran's stores, and then we'll mount our attack!"

Lumeire was able to obtain the catalyzers without issue and gave the order for us to march. We advanced toward Fort Vakmakro, trailing behind a troop of magical traphunters who disabled all of the booby traps on our path. Before long, a small fort that I assumed to be our target came into view. It was more or less as it had been described: not only was it rather small, but its walls were also quite low. Given that this was a strategically significant location, the fort's unimpressive nature led me to assume Samkh wasn't a very wealthy region.

"The time has come," said Lumeire. "But how should we go about staging the assault? Shall we blow the walls away with explosive magic, then storm the place afterward?"

"I believe it would be in our best interests to not decimate the fort, Your Lordship," Rietz gingerly suggested. "I'm sure Lord Couran wishes to use this fort after we seize it, and damaging its defenses will make it easier for our enemies to reclaim it in the future. That, in turn, could lead to a severing of our supply chain, which could spell disaster for our invasion."

"A fair point," replied Lumeire. "Though even if we were to take the fort without damaging it, it's hardly all that defensible to begin with. What's to stop them from reclaiming it, intact walls or not?"

"Not much, but an intact fort stands more of a chance of surviving an assault than one that's been halfway obliterated. That goes double in the case of a surprise attack—large catalyzers are too heavy to move around at a rapid pace,

so the enemy won't have access to the sort of magic that we do."

"Oh, yes. Indeed."

Large catalyzers were close to the size and shape of an exercise ball, and they were heavy enough that it took at least two people to drag them around in a cart. Speed and stealth were the most vital components when it came to the success or failure of a surprise attack, and having to bring one of those with you would cripple your ability to pull off either. A mid-sized catalyzer was more practical under those conditions, but it seemed to me that even Fort Vakmakro's outdated defenses would be enough to repel that sort of firepower.

"Of course, while I wouldn't recommend destroying the walls, damaging part of them shouldn't pose a problem. I'm certain our troops are capable of rebuilding a single wall, if necessary."

"Hmm—so, we destroy a segment of the wall with magic, then storm the fort using that entrance?" asked Lumeire.

"Yes, I believe that's the perfect plan. Though, it remains to be seen how many traps they've set in the interior of the fort. I would recommend we send some of our most skilled traphunters in alongside the first wave of troops."

With that, our strategy was set in stone. We began the operation the very next day, starting with Charlotte's magical offensive. She stood before a large catalyzer filled with explosive aqua magia and began chanting her incantation. This would be my first time seeing an explosion spell cast in person, so I didn't know what to expect.

As Charlotte's incantation came to an end, a red-hot globe of fire burst into being before her, rocketing off toward the fort at an astonishing velocity. Then, moments before it impacted the wall, the fireball detonated.

The sheer scale of the explosion was awe-inspiring. We were pretty far from the fort, but I could still feel the shockwave. However, when the smoke cleared, the fort's wall was still standing—in fact, it was untouched!

I asked Rietz what had happened, and he explained to me that, “Weak or not, this fort has some degree of magical defenses. I doubt they'll withstand another spell, however—I'd wager that one blast has already strained them to their limits.”

I'd never gotten a sense of how magic worked, and I couldn't pretend to understand the details, but I took that to mean that magical defenses had a set degree of durability. Lo and behold, Charlotte's second spell proved Rietz right—this time it reached the wall before detonating, and blew said wall to smithereens.



“Oh, wow,” I marveled.

“Charlotte’s work is a sight to behold, indeed.”

Charlotte, meanwhile, shot me a smirk, then cast another fireball just for good measure, widening the gap in the wall. A gaping hole had been opened in the fort’s defenses, but we weren’t planning on rushing forward. Instead, we watched and waited as enemy troops gathered by the broken wall...then once again activated our catalyzers, this time to cast flame-aspected magic. The other mages who had accompanied us joined Charlotte this time, and in the blink of an eye the hole in the wall—and the soldiers in that vicinity—were engulfed in a raging inferno. I was too far away to make out what was happening in there, but judging by the intensity of the flames, I assumed the enemy soldiers had been quite literally burned to ashes. Only then did Lumeire give the order to advance.

“Charge!” he bellowed, leading his soldiers on a mad dash through the gap in the wall and into the fort.

I, on the other hand, was left behind. I couldn’t fault Lumeire for deciding to leave me behind—I was self-aware enough to realize that I would have just slowed him and his troops down. Rietz had been prepared to sally forth, as far as I could tell, but had ended up holding back to watch me.

It wasn’t long before we received word that the remaining enemies in the fort had surrendered. Apparently, the one-two punch of the wall being blown to bits and a sizable chunk of their forces being burned to death had done a number on the survivors’ morale, so the whole fort had descended into a state of panic. None of them had imagined that their defenses would fail right away, which meant that they hadn’t realized they’d be facing Charlotte. No, her name still hadn’t finished making the rounds in Missian, so they probably weren’t aware

of her at all.

In any case, with the fort's defenders falling into disorganized chaos, storming the place hadn't been an issue even with all the traps. Before long, the enemy's leader had decided that the situation was hopeless and given the order to surrender in hopes of sparing his troops' lives. All things considered, Fort Vakmakro had fallen with unexpected ease.

After the battle was over, those of us who'd been left in the rearguard made our way up to the fort to help in the post-battle cleanup. Before I could step into the fort myself, Rietz held out a hand to stop me.

"Lord Ars...I think it would be for the best if you didn't look inside."

It didn't take much thought to realize what he meant. The battle had just concluded, so it was easy to imagine that the inside of the fort was a veritable hellscape. In particular, the area that had been devastated by magical flames was in an unspeakable state.

Nevertheless, I knew that I had to witness all of it—I couldn't run away. Lumeire may have been in command of this operation, but my retainers had still been responsible for the deaths of countless soldiers. I believed that averting my eyes from the consequences of my actions was unconscionable for a person of my status. Plus, on a more practical note, I knew that I'd end up setting foot on battlefield after battlefield in the future, and the quicker I got used to seeing corpses, the less likely I would be to panic and screw up at the worst possible moment. Familiarity with the horrors of war could mean the difference between life and death.

"There's no need to shelter me, Rietz," I said, brushing past him. "I'll be going inside."

“Very well, Milord.”

Rietz sounded reluctant, but he understood where my resolve was coming from and didn't try to stop me again.

I stepped into the fort along with Lumeire and his men, and as expected, past the wall was a field of corpses. It was hellish—worse than anything I'd ever seen before—and a sudden wave of nausea almost overcame me. I just knew Rietz would worry if he saw me retching, so I fought it back.

A fair number of the bodies had been reduced to charcoal by our flame magic, and in a sense, those were the easiest to look at. I couldn't recognize them as human bodies, even when standing right next to them.

I wasn't the only one experiencing my first battlefield—Rosell had come along as well, and he couldn't tear his eyes off the horrors around us. Rosell was still a child, and a part of me worried that exposing him to a mountain of charred and brutalized bodies might not have been the best thing for his psychological development, but at the very least, he didn't seem to be so shaken he'd lost himself. The rest of my retainers were used to this sort of thing, so they barely paid any mind to the sight at all.

We proceeded deeper into the fort, where we came across a group of people who had been disarmed and tied up. They were, I assumed, the fort's surviving soldiers and commanding officers.

“What will you do with them now that we've won?” I asked Lumeire.

“It is up to Lord Couran to decide. That said, though circumstances have led us to come to blows, these men *are* our fellow Missian countrymen. I'm confident that His Lordship will spare their lives. We won't be letting them go until this affair has been resolved, but take care to ensure that they're kept safe and

comfortable.”

“Understood,” I replied. I couldn’t predict how Couran would react to the prisoners, but I agreed with Lumeire, since I couldn’t imagine him ordering their executions.

Several of the prisoners were looking at us with clear and undisguised animosity in their eyes. Their leader may have ordered his troops to surrender, but I got the sense that not all of the troops had been pleased with his decision. Some of them were fiercely loyal toward the Count of Samkh, and I had a horrible feeling that their executions would prove unavoidable...though of course, I could always petition Couran for mercy if it came to that.

“Now then—we must have this fort back in a defensible state on the double. I leave that task in your capable hands, Menas,” said Lumeire.

“Yes, Milord,” replied Menas. He was one of Lumeire’s most trusted retainers, and given his B-ranked aptitude for Fortification, I presumed he was knowledgeable when it came to those sorts of repairs. Menas gathered up a few of Lumeire’s mages and started giving them directions on how to mend the wall.

“So, umm, about the bodies,” I said to Lumeire. “I think it would be a good idea to lay them to rest, if that’s an option.”

My proposal wasn’t motivated by respect for the dead—I just didn’t think I could tolerate being around them for that much longer.

“A fine point. Our casualties were few, but we did lose some men, and as I said a moment ago, our enemies were also fellow countrymen. They ought to be treated with respect in death.”

Lumeire ordered a few of his men to begin preparations for a funeral service.

Cremation was standard practice in Missian, and after bodies were burned, the bones of the dead were buried in graves. The local customs were similar to those of Japan, all things considered. We could identify our own casualties, and I assumed their remains would be returned to their families, but there was no way for us to determine who our fallen enemies had been. We burned them together and laid their bones to rest in a mass grave.

After we'd finished dealing with the corpses, all that was left was for us to wait for Couran to make his way to the fort. I couldn't seem to calm down as I waited, which was no surprise—it would have been more surprising if I *had* been calm after witnessing all those bodies. Rietz, Charlotte, and the others all seemed fine, but I was beginning to understand that I just wasn't built for the battlefield. Even ignoring my mental weakness, I was also frail and had never had much of a mind for tactics. Frankly, I didn't think I was of much use at all.

Not even my Appraisal ability was useful—it wasn't like I could tell everyone to stop fighting and spare an enemy soldier if I realized they were talented. It was kill or be killed on the battlefield, and I wasn't naïve enough to think that sort of softness would fly. I wanted to end this war as soon as possible, receive my promised promotion to Count of Canarre, and redouble my efforts to seek out and recruit more capable retainers.

As I mulled over my plans for the future, Rietz stepped up to me.

"There's been a development, Lord Ars," he said. "It seems Pham has made his way here."

"What?" I gasped, stunned by the news.

Why would Pham be here? I thought I asked the Shadows to infiltrate Velshdt.

"He wishes to speak with you."

“All right, then—I’ll be right there,” I replied, then set off to find Pham without wasting a second.

○

“Hey, there. Been a while,” said Pham as Rietz and I approached him. We’d found him just a short ways away from the fort, accompanied by the retainer who I’d tasked with working as my point of contact with the Shadows. It seemed he was the one who had informed Rietz of Pham’s visit.

“Considering the fact that I asked you to move your operation to Velshdt in my last message and you’re here instead, I’m guessing something about the request wasn’t to your liking?” I said, cutting straight to the point at hand.

“You’d better believe it. I mean, if the particulars of a job are gonna change *that* much, I wanna hear it straight from the horse’s mouth. Miscommunication can be fatal in this line of work.”

That makes sense, I guess.

In retrospect, completely shifting the objective of his operation based on a message he didn’t even know had come from me seemed a little unwise, yes—not to mention that our working relationship didn’t go back very far, and he didn’t have any particular reason to trust me.

In any case, it just so happened that I was beginning to rethink my plan to have him infiltrate Velshdt. Conquering the city was going to be the most formidable obstacle in our path, certainly, but there were still several forts and castles to deal with first, and not all of them were going to be as easy to topple as Fort Vakmakro.

I figured the Shadows' skills might help us take those castles down. They could disable traps that had been set up within them, for instance, or open their gates from the inside, or poison the soldiers stationed there, or set fire to their provisions and ensure they couldn't withstand a long-term siege. Having a group like theirs on our side would open up all sorts of options.

I'd spoken with Rietz about my idea earlier.

"I see... Yes, I believe that would be wise. It could be much quicker and easier to claim the forts in our path with the Shadows' aid," he'd replied at the time. "Of course, I can't say with certainty whether participating in battles is at all their forte."

"Fair enough. Still, there's no harm in asking."

And ask was what I did, in the end.

"If possible, I was hoping the Shadows would be willing to help us in battle. Specifically, I'd be asking for you to infiltrate castles, disable traps, open gates—that sort of thing. Are any of those activities that your people are willing to engage in?"

"Willing? That's our bread and butter, if anything," replied Pham.

"Oh, it is?" I asked, a little surprised.

"Well, we all have our strong points, 'course. *My* specialty just happens to be infiltration and sabotage."

Yeah, I can see that being helpful in a siege.

"Course, I'll be charging you a lot more for it than I was for gathering information. Think you can afford our rates?"

"How much are we talking?"

“A minimum of two hundred gold per infiltration. We’ll be putting our lives on the line, so it’s a fair rate, by my measure.”

“That’s...a little outside my budget,” I admitted with a wince. “However, I believe Lord Couran would be willing to pay you at that rate.”

“Your general, right? Meh, no skin off my back—all coin is worth the same,” replied Pham with a shrug.

It seemed I’d have to bring Pham up to Couran the next time I had the opportunity. Given that Couran had faith in my Appraisal skill, I had a feeling he’d be willing to play along.

“So, guess you had second thoughts about the Velshdt thing?”

“Right. I’m changing my request. We’ll be staging assaults on numerous enemy bases in the immediate future, and I would like the Shadows to be available in case we end up needing your services. I’d like you to travel with our army for the time being, if that’s doable.”

“Works for me,” Pham immediately agreed. He explained that while some of the other members of the Shadows had accompanied him, they’d be holding back and tailing our forces rather than traveling with us. If he ended up needing them, Pham had methods for calling them over.

Pham himself, incidentally, would have to stay by my side while traveling with our troops, and explained that he’d be playing the role of my maid to explain his presence. The story would be that he’d been so worried about his—or rather, “her”—beloved master that *she’d* been unable to stop herself from running off to join me.

It was kind of astonishing how fast he changed into his maid outfit. I didn’t even catch where he’d been keeping the thing! I also had to wonder why he’d

had it on him, given that he'd had no idea he'd wind up impersonating my maid when he came to see me.

"I always keep my disguise kit on hand," Pham explained before I even had the chance to ask. My questions must have shown through on my face.

Shortly thereafter, the three of us returned to the fort. Pham's maid act was flawless, and not a single person even began to suspect him of anything untoward. He'd told us to call him Rin while he was in his maid persona. Even Charlotte, who'd met him before, was taken in and asked me when I'd hired a maid like her...though when I explained that "she" was Pham, it turned out that Charlotte had just forgotten about him altogether.

We didn't meet him that long ago, did we?

Rosell remembered everything about our meeting with Pham, and much to my surprise, Mireille took one look at him and said, "Oh! Is that you, Rin?"

It took me up until that moment to remember I'd hired her on Pham's recommendation, and I assumed that he'd already been using the Rin persona back when he'd first met her. Mireille didn't seem to have seen through to his true identity, though I had a feeling that she at least had her suspicions. I had mentioned to her that I had a band of skilled spies in my employ, and she seemed like the sort of person who'd put those pieces together.

"O-Oh, is that you, Mireille? It's been ages!" exclaimed Pham, barely missing a beat before dropping into character.

"Yeah, good to see you. Got myself a new lord to serve thanks to your reference."

"Oh, congratulations!"

"Thanks. And hey, that maid outfit *really* suits you! I could just eat you right

up,” said Mireille with a mischievous smirk. If she had seen through Pham’s identity, I didn’t get the sense she was planning on pointing it out...or at least, not until she walked up to me and whispered, “So, just how good of a spy is he?”

Yeah, of course she’d figure it out.

“He’s good, no doubt there. His group managed to infiltrate a castle and steal a letter.”

“Hmm... Sounds like little ol’ Rin’s quite something—if that is his real name. Anyway, what’s his role in their operation?”

“He’s the leader.”

“The leader?! But he’s just a kid!” Mireille gaped.

“He may look like a kid, but he’s twenty-two.”

“No kidding? I figured out he was a guy easily enough, but I didn’t see *that* one coming, that’s for damn sure.”

“Speaking of which, how’d you figure out he was a guy?”

“I mean, you can tell just by looking at him, right?” replied Mireille with a shrug.

Uh, no... In fact, I doubt I’d have ever figured it out if I couldn’t appraise him.

Hell, there were times I couldn’t believe it even after I’d appraised him. I still had my doubts, on some level—it wasn’t like I’d ever seen any concrete evidence one way or another. He’d told me he was a boy, and my infallible Appraisal skill had corroborated that claim, but his cross-dressing was just so convincing that I couldn’t help but question that reality...and yet somehow, Mireille had seen through it in an instant.

*Maybe she's been cross-dressing this whole time and knows from experience...
She's never struck me as feminine, come to think of it...*

"You're thinking something real rude right now, aren't you?" said Mireille.

"N-No, not at all!"

"Well, keep it that way! Anyway, if he can work his magic when we get to Castle Samkh, the county will more or less be ours already. We've got 'em outnumbered, and if they lose their main stronghold on top of it, surrender'll be their only option."

Oddly enough, Mireille didn't seem all that excited about the thought.

"Is there something wrong with that?"

"Nah, not exactly. I just thought this war would test me, y'know? Thought it'd give me a real thrill. Guess I'll just be bored from here to Velshdt," Mireille said as she stifled a yawn. It seemed that the ease with which we'd claimed Fort Vakmakro had made her lose motivation. I hoped I could count on her to find it again when we needed her, but I was starting to get pretty concerned about her attitude.

We spent a few days after that in the fort. Eventually, our report reached Couran and he arrived to meet us.

"Splendid work, Lumeire! I'm astonished—to think you'd claim the fort with almost no losses! Well done, my man!" said Couran, singing our commanding officer's praises the moment he arrived. "And you deserve commendation as well, I'm sure. I imagine your service proved invaluable, Ars."

"Not at all, I barely did anything."

"Ha ha ha! No need for such humility—I've already heard that Charlotte, one of *your* retainers, proved instrumental in your victory!"

That, I couldn't deny. Charlotte's presence had made all the difference, and I had a hard time imagining the fort's wall would have fallen so fast without her. I'd done some asking around after the battle ended, in fact, and had learned that even though the fort's magical defenses were weak, it would have taken an ordinary mage far longer to penetrate them. It seemed the defenders' state of disorder had been sparked in no small part by those defenses falling much sooner than anyone could have anticipated. In that sense, Charlotte was more or less the battle's MVP.

"What shall we do with the soldiers we took prisoner, Milord?" asked Lumeire.

"Hmm... If at all possible, I'd absorb them into my own army to get them to fight for my cause," said Couran. "But I'm sure some of them would refuse to swear loyalty to me. Those who follow me can be spared, but the rest will have to be put to death."

That was more or less how I'd expected him to treat the captives. I'd actually made a point of not appraising them because I'd known it might come to this. If I found out that one of them was talented, and if that soldier refused to swear fealty to Couran, I wouldn't put it past myself to beg for them to be spared, and that would sour Couran's opinion of me.

I had no confidence in my ability to sit back and watch a soldier with Nobunaga-level stats get beheaded. Of course, considering that human life was equally weighted whether or not the human in question was talented, the way I was viewing the whole issue was kind of messed up. I knew that on an intellectual level. I just couldn't help but feel that executing somebody with talent was an unbearable waste. Long story short: I'd resolved to only appraise the prisoners after it had been determined that their lives would be spared.

“Ars,” said Couran, “have you appraised the prisoners yet?”

“No, not yet,” I replied.

“Then you should do so at once. I would prefer not to kill someone with the potential for greatness.”

Does that mean he might spare someone if I say that they’re talented enough, even if they don’t swear fealty to him? It’d be way too dangerous to let them go, so maybe he’s planning on throwing them in jail until they change their mind.

That was something to be celebrated, but it led to an immediate, much less appealing realization: by identifying someone as not talented, I would be sentencing them to death. The thought was a little distressing, to say the least, but I couldn’t deny the rationality of the solution. I knew that I could lie and claim that all of them were talented, but that sort of ruse would be easy to see through. I’d have to put pity to the side, tell the truth, and accept whatever came from it.

I set about appraising the prisoners. There were just about fifty of them in total, and it took me some time and quite a bit of eye strain, but I eventually appraised them all. None of them turned out to have the sort of superhuman talents I’d found in Rietz and Charlotte, but five of them were rather remarkable by more ordinary standards, and three of those individuals had refused to defect to Couran’s side. Those three were dragged away, still tied up, and I was told they’d be transported to Castle Kranpless, which had a jail they wouldn’t be breaking out of any time soon.

The soldiers who had agreed to serve Couran were released from their bonds and told to remain in Fort Vakmakro, where they’d serve as part of its guard. That left just twenty soldiers who neither had exceptional talents nor were willing to disavow their former masters. There were actually thirty of them at

first, but after some persuasion, ten of them had been convinced that their loyalty wasn't worth their lives and had agreed to switch sides. The remaining twenty were those who had refused to serve Couran come hell or high water. Eventually, Couran concluded that convincing them otherwise would be impossible and ordered their execution.

The twenty soldiers were lined up on their knees, their heads laid down upon stools. An equal number of executioners stood to the side, axes held at the ready. I wasn't required to witness the deed being done, but I decided that it would only be right for me to see it through. They were dying because I hadn't picked them out as being talented, so I felt I had an obligation to see this through to the end.

I'd witnessed an execution before, just once, and the man who had been killed back then was a criminal and a murderer—the lowest of the low. These men weren't criminals, though. If anything, their refusal to betray their cause proved their loyalty and sincerity. I almost couldn't bear to watch...but I forced myself to anyway.

"Do it," said Couran. The executioners' axes fell, and the prisoners' heads plopped to the ground, which was soon stained red by the blood flowing from the stumps of their necks.

I watched it all, from start to finish, without averting my gaze once. This time, nausea didn't overtake me. Part of that was because I was starting to grow desensitized to violence, but mostly, my disgust at the spectacle was overwhelmed by the sorrow I felt at the senselessness of their deaths. Some of them were still young—they couldn't even have been twenty yet. Taking part in a battle meant putting your life on the line, and I knew they'd accepted the possibility of their deaths, but I still couldn't help but grieve for the futures that

had been denied to them. I could only pray that, like me, they would be reincarnated and granted another chance at life.

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After the prisoners' bodies were cleared away, Couran gathered all of his commanding officers and advisors for a meeting.

"Fort Vakmakro is ours," he said. "I wish to keep this momentum going and claim Castle Samkh next. Once the castle is in our hands, our control over the county at large will be indisputable."

"Umm...may I suggest something?" I asked, raising my hand.

"As you will."

"In regards to our attack on Castle Samkh, I believe that the services of a group of spies I'm acquainted with could prove helpful. If we have them lay the groundwork for our assault, it could make claiming the castle much easier. And since we'll still have plenty of fighting to do before Velshdt falls, we should do whatever we can to expend as few men and resources on Castle Samkh as possible."

"Oh?" said Couran, raising an eyebrow. "Would these spies of yours happen to be the same band who pilfered the letter that brought Perreina to our side? If so, their abilities have already been thoroughly proven. This could be a tenable plan indeed."

"That is correct, yes. There's just one thing—their services come at quite the cost. They want at least two hundred gold coins to get the job done. That sort of cost is beyond my means, I'm afraid, but if *you* would be willing to hire

them...”

“Two hundred gold is more than affordable,” Couran said without hesitation. “Their skills have already been proven, as I said, and I trust your ability to judge their worth. I look forward to the benefits their services will provide.”

Thankfully, it didn’t take much convincing at all to get Couran to foot the Shadows’ bill. I was relieved to know that they’d be on our side going forward. I hadn’t heard much about Castle Samkh, but I knew it wouldn’t fall as easily as Fort Vakmakro.

“I would like to hear what these spies will do for us directly from their leader, if possible. Will you bring him to our next council?” asked Couran.

“Umm... I’d like to, but their leader makes a point of not exposing his identity in public. I doubt it would be easy to convince him to attend a meeting like this,” I replied.

“Hmm. Understandable, I suppose, considering his profession. In that case, I shall leave it to you to serve as an intermediary. As far as my priorities for their services are concerned, I would be most interested in them opening the gates, disabling any magical traps within the castle, or destroying their supplies of aqua magia. Any of those would make our assault far easier.”

I blinked.

“You want to destroy their aqua magia? With all due respect, won’t our forces be able to use them once we’ve seized the castle?”

“Our supplies are more than ample already. The potential to gain a surplus is worth less to me than reducing our enemies’ ability to drive us off.”

“Understood. I’ll see to it that your message is delivered.”

“Good,” said Couran. “And with that, I call this meeting to a close. We shall

decide upon a date for our assault as soon as Ars's spies inform us their work is complete."

After the council disbanded, I went out to find Pham. The moment I made contact with him, I launched into negotiating for the Shadows' services.

"We're hoping to hire you to open Castle Samkh's gates, disable any magical traps you find inside, and destroy their stocks of aqua magia. Will that be possible?" I asked.

"A three-parter, eh...? Should be doable. I've taken a look at Castle Samkh before, and from what I could tell the place isn't locked down very tight. Shouldn't be hard to slip right in."

"And how much would you charge for the task?"

"For all three objectives? Two hundred and fifty gold, with fifty paid up front."

"Understood. I'll speak with Lord Couran about paying your advance. Is there any way for you to inform us when your work is finished?"

"Yeah, that won't be a problem. We'll have Ben standing by outside the castle, and he can use sound magic to send a message once we're done."

"Perfect," I replied. All things considered, our negotiations concluded without a hitch. I reported back to Couran on the matter, and as expected, he approved the advance payment without question.

After that, we began our advance upon Castle Samkh, taking great care not to wander into any magical traps along the way. We set up our encampment in a wide-open field a short ways away from the castle, close enough that the moment we received word that the gates had been opened, we'd be able to storm inside.

The enemy showed no signs of sallying forth to engage with our army—it

seemed they were intent on settling in for a long siege. There'd been no reports of the castle receiving reinforcements from Velshdt, and Rosell and Mireille theorized their goal was to stall as long as they could using as few troops as possible, thus buying Velshdt more time to prepare.

Assuming the troops who remained in Castle Samkh knew all this, they were prepared to fight to the death. They weren't lacking in morale, that was certain, and I knew that soldiers who were prepared to die were far more dangerous than those who valued their lives. Breaking a siege by force wasn't impossible, by any means, but it would take time and involved sacrificing quite a few of our troops. It seemed my choice to rely on espionage had been a good one.

"I've received another request from Lord Couran," I told Pham, who I'd met to update him on our plans. "He wants you to open the gates after dark, if possible."

We were hoping to catch the castle's defenders off-guard, and they'd more likely notice the gates opening during the middle of the day.

"Didn't need to tell me that," replied Pham. "That was our plan from the start."

"Oh? Well, good."

"All right—we'll be sneaking into the castle, so this'll be the last you hear from me for a while. Ben will contact you as soon as we're finished laying the groundwork. You remember what Ben looks like, right?"

"I, umm..."

I remembered how *unmemorable* Ben's appearance was. I'd taken to recognizing him by his real name instead, which was unique, to say the least: Alexandros Vermandolt. I figured that if I saw a person who looked

unremarkable, but had that name upon appraisal, I could be certain it was Ben, so I told Pham I remembered him for simplicity's sake.

After that, Pham set off for the castle. I was pretty sure some of the other Shadows would be sneaking in with him—not that I could see them—and I said a quick prayer for their success, then settled in to wait for their report.

○

The County of Samkh was situated in the eastern reaches of Missian, and Castle Samkh was the single most strategically significant structure in the county. That significance was part of the reason why tensions within the castle were running so high.

“I knew they'd take Vakmakro, but I never thought it would happen this soon,” muttered Fredore Bandle, the reigning Count of Samkh. His long and bushy beard covered the lower half of his face, but it wasn't enough to hide the obvious traces of fatigue that colored his complexion. He'd hardly slept a wink since hearing the news of Couran's troops marching on him.

Fredore had known that Fort Vakmakro's defenses wouldn't hold under pressure, but it had come as quite a shock to hear that it had fallen in a day.

“I'm told that one of the enemy's mages was fearsomely powerful,” said the retainer who had brought Fredore the news.

“*Fearsome* indeed. And now we're supposed to stand up to that very same mage?” Fredore grumbled.

Couran's army had set up an encampment near his castle. They had yet to lay siege to the structure, nor had they attempted a direct assault, but Fredore

knew it would be coming any minute. The best he could hope to do was stall for time, and he was certain Couran was aware of that fact as well, so he expected an all-out offensive soon. They were just taking their time preparing for the attack—there was no telling when they'd go on the offensive, and the castle's residents had to be alert for fear of getting caught unawares by a sneak attack.

“Are you certain this was wise, Milord?” asked the retainer. “You could have petitioned Lord Kanes for reinforcements.”

“And I'm sure he would have been happy to provide. My cousin has always been too generous for his own good,” Fredore sighed. “Sending us soldiers would have been a foolish decision on his part, though. Losing this battle is inevitable, but if we hope to win the war, we must delay the enemy here for as long as possible, using as few troops and resources as we can manage.”

Kanes Bandle, the Count of Velshdt and Fredore's cousin, would have been eager to aid him, and Fredore knew it. Unfortunately, he knew just as well that doing so would have spelled doom for Kanes in the long run.

“We've trapped this castle to the nines, and we'll be making our enemies' lives hell even after they claim it. Couran's strategy will fail, and this is where it will all fall to pieces,” said Fredore with a malicious smirk. He'd made peace with the fact that he would die before the battle was over, and he'd ensured that the only soldiers who remained in Castle Samkh all shared his resolve.

Later that night, Fredore had found the time to take a brief nap. Nervous as he was, no one could stay awake forever. However, he'd chosen a poor moment to catch up on his rest.

“It's an emergency, Milord!” a soldier bellowed as he burst into Fredore's bedchamber.

“Has it begun?!” Fredore shouted as he leaped out of bed, certain that Couran had commenced his assault.

“N-No, it’s not the enemy,” the soldier sputtered. “It’s our aqua magia storehouse! There’s been an explosion, and our reserves have been wasted!”

“Th-They *what*?!”

“All of our flame and explosion-aspected aqua magia is gone! We won’t be able to repel an enemy assault at this rate!”

Despite having just been roused from a dead slumber, Fredore was as wide awake as he’d ever been. The shock was just that intense. The castle’s aqua magia reserves were meant to supply an enormous catalyzer installed within the keep. It would have allowed them to rain hell down upon an attacking army, gouging away at their numbers and dealing a massive blow to their morale. It was painfully easy for Fredore to understand just how much the loss of that capability would set his castle’s defenses back.

“Have we been infiltrated?!”

“I-I believe so...”

“And the spy?! Have you found him?! This will only get worse if you don’t catch him! The aqua magia could be the least of our worries! He could throw the damn gates open, in the worst case! We wouldn’t last a day! Find him! Find him *now*!” Fredore shrieked, his face pallid with panic and anger.

“Yes, Milord!” the soldier shouted, then spun around to search for the spy.

At that precise moment, however, a thunderous noise rang out. Fredore had heard such sounds before—it was the noise generated by a Rumble spell, and a noise that almost always spelled trouble. Fredore felt a sinking sensation in his gut the second he heard it, and a moment later, that feeling was proven all too

prescient as a voice, enhanced to many times its natural volume by sound magic, echoed through the castle.

“Attack! We’re under attack! The north gate’s been breached!”

o

Night had long since fallen, but Couran’s encampment outside of Castle Samkh was abuzz with activity. His soldiers stood at the ready, prepared to begin their assault at any moment. I didn’t anticipate that I’d be participating in said assault, however—nor would Couran, Lumeire, or any of the army’s other high-ranking commanding officers.

As far as I understood the plan, the moment the gates opened, a group of Couran’s most elite soldiers would rush inside to secure the gatehouse. Earlier that evening, Ben had found me and informed me that the Shadows would tell us that the gate was open by way of a Rumble spell. I’d already informed Couran, who in turn had informed his soldiers, so that spell would be the signal that set the whole operation off.

Eventually, the distinctive sound of a Rumble spell echoed across the plains. It was too dark out to see what was happening in detail, but I could tell that the entire army had started moving out. Our assault on Castle Samkh had begun.

“Now we just have to hope the castle falls with little resistance,” muttered Couran, who was standing nearby.

Before long, shouts, screams, and the enemy’s magically-enhanced messages and orders began to ring out, accompanied by the occasional explosion. Those last noises I could attribute to our own mages, who’d been supplied with

explosive aqua magia for this particular mission. Charlotte, however, was not among them—she and Rietz were both with me, standing by as part of our reserve force.

Mireille, on the other hand, had chosen to participate in the initial attack. In her own words, “I’ll lose my edge if I don’t get a decent fight in one of these days!”

I was a little caught off-guard by that, considering what a lazy bum she came off as most of the time. On the other hand, she was as strong as most men, and a capable fighter to boot. She’d chosen to wield a glaive in this particular battle: a weapon that resembled a spear with a sword attached to one end. It was on the hefty side of things, but Mireille swung it around with practiced ease.

Mireille had trained with a wide variety of weapons, it seemed, but the glaive was her personal favorite. She’d also brought along a small catalyzer, enabling her to wield magic as well. I knew well how tough Mireille was, but I had to admit, I was still a little worried about her. She didn’t seem like the sort of person who would die in vain, so those worries were likely groundless, but still.

We stood there, waiting for word from our invading force. After a far too brief period, a single soldier rushed over to deliver a report.

“Castle Samkh has fallen, Your Lordship! The enemy is routed, and the Count of Samkh has been apprehended!”

“Well done!” Couran shouted. “And with such speed! You certainly didn’t take your time!”

“It seems the enemy planned their defense around magical traps within the castle walls,” the soldier explained. “By the time we arrived, however, every single one of them had been disabled. The spies you sent in may well have won

us the day.”

“Did they, now? Then you are owed a fair share of credit for introducing them to us, Ars,” said Couran, turning to me. “Thanks to your contribution, we’ve claimed Castle Samkh with ease. I see once again that I was right to turn to you for help.”

I was happy to receive his praise, but I also felt a little uncomfortable considering that, once again, I hadn’t done much on the actual battlefield.

“Now then, I wish to speak to the count. Bring Fredore here at once.”

“Yes, Milord!” the soldier replied, then spun about and rushed back toward the castle.

I soon learned that we’d taken an awful lot of captives this time around. That, I assumed, meant I’d be put to use for the same sort of judicial process as at Fort Vakmakro. I wasn’t at all excited by the prospect, but I knew that if Couran ordered me to do so, I’d have very little choice in the matter. All I could do was prepare myself for when the moment came.

As I tried to steel my nerves for that development, a woman wearing a maid uniform stepped up to me. It took me a moment longer than it should’ve to realize that “she” was, in fact, Pham. His work complete, he’d returned to me much quicker than I’d anticipated.

“Nicely done,” I whispered to ensure nobody around us overheard me.

“Great, thanks. So, think you could throw a bonus onto that payment?” Pham asked.

“What for?”

“There was an unexpected factor we took care of for you,” he explained. “We could’ve ignored it, but you might’ve lost half your army if things went south, so

we figured you'd prefer we get it done."

"What? Start over, and actually explain it this time."

"The basement was rigged with a real nasty, specialized magical trap. Long story short, they were ready to blow the whole damn place up, castle and all. Whoever set the thing up must've been an incredible mage—dunno who it was, and considering it looked like it was cast around a hundred years ago, they're probably dead. Point is, it was a real pain in the ass to disarm."



They were going to blow up the entire castle?!

In other words, if the castle ever fell and its defenders were killed, they had a system in place to ensure the structure itself wouldn't be used against them. That was a rather crafty move, and the fact that Pham's crew had disarmed it saved us from incurring massive losses. I did have to wonder how much of a "pain in the ass" disarming the trap had been, considering the plan had gone according to schedule, but I decided not to question it.

"I'll negotiate with Lord Couran on your behalf," I promised.

"You do that," Pham said, then left just as quickly as he'd appeared.

The Count of Samkh, Fredore Bandle, was brought to us. Our soldiers had to carry him, on account of him being bound hand and foot. His beard was the first thing I noticed about him. It was long and didn't seem particularly well-kept. It was downright scraggly, even. His height wasn't remarkable—I would've described it as average—and he had a muscular build that told me he could hold his own in a fight.

According to Couran, Fredore would not join his side no matter what we said or did to him. Killing him, however, would bring all sorts of complications with it, so Couran had decided to spare his life for the moment. In the long term, however, keeping him jailed had the potential to be even more tiresome, so it wasn't the easiest of decisions to make. In any case, his capabilities wouldn't play a factor in his fate, so I decided to refrain from appraising him.

"Hello, Fredore," said Couran. "I hardly need to ask, but for the record: have you any interest in becoming my subordinate?"

"If you would have me," Fredore said, hesitating for just a moment. "I would enter your service and fight by your side, Lord Couran."

Couran looked taken aback. That was not the answer he'd been expecting. His shock was only visible for a moment—it wouldn't do to let his true feelings show during this sort of conversation—but that single instant was enough to tell me how surprised he was.

Fredore went on to tell us about how he'd fallen into conflict with his cousin, how he had no end of doubts regarding the manner in which Vasmarque conducted himself, and a wide variety of other explanations for his decision. Still, even with all those factors taken into consideration, it was hard to believe he was willing to side with us.

Unless... Wait... Of course!

The pieces finally clicked together the moment I remembered the trap that Pham mentioned. Fredore, in all likelihood, had no idea that it had been disabled. It seemed plausible that Fredore was plotting to lure Couran into the castle under the pretense of surrendering, then light the whole place up, killing both of them in the process. Unfortunately for his scheme, the trap that the whole plot centered around had already been dealt with. His self-sacrificing assassination attempt would never come to fruition.

"Very well," said Couran after Fredore finished his explanation. "I understand your position, and I would gladly—"

"Might I have a word, Your Lordship?" I asked, interrupting him before he could make any promises.

"What is it?" asked Couran.

"I thought you would want to hear a piece of information the spies I hired passed to me a moment ago. It seems there was an unbelievably dangerous trap set up within Castle Samkh that they've managed to disable."

“What?!” Fredore shouted in shock.

“As such, if you intended to lure Lord Couran into your castle and end his life, you should know the effort would be wasted.”

“I-Impossible,” Fredore stammered. One look at him was enough to convince Couran my story was true, and he asked me for the details, which I readily provided, from the particulars of the trap to the plan I assumed Fredore had concocted.

“Hmm... Judging by how the good count has reacted to this news, I assume it’s all true. I never knew such a trap was possible—it seems I’ll have to be more vigilant than ever, going forward. Your spies will be rewarded generously for their service, Ars.”

“Ugh!” grunted Fredore, the color draining from his face. He may have lost his castle in the span of a single night, but I presumed he thought he’d still be able to redeem himself by taking Couran with him.

“Shall I assume, Fredore, that everything you just told me was a fabrication?” asked Couran.

Fredore didn’t respond. Instead, he just glared at Couran with a gaze as cold as ice and as baleful as hellfire. I would’ve been shaken to see someone give me that sort of look, but Couran seemed unmoved. It was, I supposed, the composure of a man who’d managed to maintain a position of power for years on end in the unstable environment that was the Summerforth Empire.

“Lock him up in the castle jails,” Couran commanded. “Don’t let him out, no matter what happens.”

“Yes, Milord!” replied one of the nearby soldiers.

“Speak with his surviving followers as well. Those who are willing to swear

fealty to me shall be spared, while those who refuse will be appraised by Ars. As before, I will take his report regarding their talents into consideration, then decide who will be jailed and who will be executed.”

Soon, a procession of prisoners was brought before me. Some of Fredore’s soldiers had fled toward Velshdt, but the majority of them had been captured. I wouldn’t have to appraise an entire castle’s worth of troops, since the successful escapees, those who were slain in battle, and the small number who agreed to swear allegiance to Couran made up most of the castle’s soldiers.

“The appraisals, if you would,” said Couran.

“Right,” I replied. I had way more people to deal with than I’d had back at Fort Vakmakro. However, I had no choice but to do what I could. It took quite some time, but I managed to make it through all of them.

Nobody struck me as truly exceptional this time around, though I did find that one of their commanding officers had a Valor of 88, which put him far above the mid-seventies score I’d expect from people in his position. Seven others seemed skilled enough that killing them would have been a waste, but that was about it. Once again, I was surprised by how rare talented individuals were. I was starting to appreciate just how lucky I’d been to meet Rietz and the others when I was young.

I told Couran everything I’d seen, sparing no detail, and he declared that those who would not serve him would be put to death the next day. Then, we retired to Castle Samkh to rest and discuss our strategy for the next stage of the war.

“Now that was the workout I’d been looking for!” said Mireille. She’d started drinking the second she got back from the assault on Castle Samkh. She’d sustained a few minor flesh wounds, but thankfully, she seemed fine.

“Just don’t go taking any unnecessary risks, please,” I sighed.

“Risks? Hah! You think I’d get myself killed in a place like this?” Mireille replied indignantly. “You should’ve come along, Rietz!”

“Perhaps I should have. It has been too long since my last engagement,” Rietz replied. It seemed he was a little more battle-hungry than I’d thought.

“I didn’t get to fight this time. I wanna hurry up and take on someone who’s worth my time!” Charlotte grumbled. I was starting to suspect that people with high Valor scores were just more combative on the whole.

“Meh, you wouldn’t have had much luck there. We only faced grunts and small fries this time around. Hope we’ll get some *real* opponents in the next battle.”

She’s planning on fighting again next time?

“Oh, right! I got some good info from one of the prisoners,” Mireille continued. “Seems my little brother got sent over to Velshdt!”

“Your little brother?” I repeated.

“Yeah, he’s one of Vasmarque’s flunkies. Not exactly top-shelf material, but he *is* my brother, so he’s got a little more fight in him than the trash we dealt with here. Taking Velshdt might be an actual struggle! This is gonna be *fun*!”

“You seem awfully excited to go to war with your own brother,” I observed. “Wouldn’t most people be upset about that?”

“Upset? Why?”

“I mean, isn’t it normal to not want to fight your family?!”

“Oooh, I get it. We used to get along okay, sure, but not so much these days. I’d be fine with killing him if it came to that,” Mireille casually explained. It didn’t seem like she was putting on a front, either—there was no sense of familial affection in how she talked about her brother. I was once again reminded that Mireille had a very unusual way of looking at the world.

“What sort of person is your brother, Master?” asked Rosell. He’d taken to calling her “Master” in the time I’d been away from my estate, it seemed.

“Hmm—good question... He used to be a brainless little moron, but he learned to use his head a little as he grew up. I’ve heard rumors that he’s Vasmarque’s right-hand man these days, if you can believe it.”

“Doesn’t that mean he’s kind of amazing?” asked Rosell.

“Hard to say. He’s smarter than the average peasant, for sure.”

I was having a hard time telling if she held her brother’s capabilities in high esteem or not. I couldn’t imagine Vasmarque would have sent him to Velshdt if he was incompetent, though. If he were, that would be a sign that Vasmarque was awful at choosing his most trusted subordinates.

In any case, it was clear that the fight for Velshdt would be harder than the conquest of Castle Samkh in terms of its leadership, its garrison, *and* the sturdiness of the castle itself. We would still have them outnumbered, but that didn’t mean we’d be able to just waltz in and storm the place this time. Castle Samkh might have proven simple to claim, but I couldn’t let myself get used to that sort of good fortune. I’d have to plan and prepare with great caution before our next engagement. Conveniently enough, it wasn’t long before

Couran gathered his retainers for a meeting regarding the imminent conquest of Velshdt.

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“The battle for Castle Samkh is won, and thanks to your valiant efforts, our victory came at negligible cost! All of you have my sincerest thanks,” Couran said as our latest council of war began.

He went on to explain that our next move would be to bring the entirety of the County of Samkh under our control. We’d claimed the castle, but there were still pockets of resistance elsewhere in the county, and we couldn’t claim to have conquered Samkh until all of them were eliminated. Luckily, there weren’t all that many of them, so he didn’t anticipate the mop-up process would take an egregious amount of time. Couran declared who would be responsible for suppressing the remaining resistance in Samkh, and neither I nor Lumeire were among them.

After that discussion concluded, we moved to the primary topic at hand: the strategy for our invasion of Velshdt.

“To begin with,” said Couran. “Rosell. What are your thoughts on the matter?”

“I believe that we should carry out our attack with all due haste—even quicker than we swept through Samkh,” Rosell replied. After all the plans he’d contributed to so far, it seemed Couran and the rest of his followers had formed quite a high opinion of Rosell and his perspective. Virtually no one looked down on him on account of his age anymore, and even the nobles present lent his

words serious consideration.

“I don’t imagine our enemy anticipated that we would advance this quickly, and I’m certain they aren’t yet prepared to face us. If we take advantage of this opportunity to strike several key strategic locations, it could prove instrumental in the long term.”

“Indeed,” said Couran. “As it so happens, I had the same thought. Pressing our advantage will incur no small number of risks, but I believe it is for the best. We *will* have to claim Castle Staatz before an invasion of Castle Velshdt is feasible, of course, and Castle Staatz is known for being nigh impregnable. If we give them the time to improve their defenses, the losses we’ll incur will be severe—and needless to say, the fewer casualties now, the easier our eventual invasion of Velshdt will become.”

Couran’s other advisors spoke up one after the other to advocate for his and Rosell’s plan. I was motivated to get the war over with as quickly as possible, so I also agreed with that course of action. I thought that nobody was going to object until suddenly, Mireille leaped into the conversation.

“Wait a minute—bad plan. You’ll get us all killed at this rate,” she said. I was a little surprised. I’d expected her to be the sort of person who’d be all for seizing the initiative. “I’m guessing you haven’t heard that my brother’s gonna be in charge of the enemy’s forces from now on, right?”

“I have, in fact, been informed of that matter. To my understanding, Thomas has been stationed in Velshdt to coordinate their defense.”

“Then I shouldn’t have to tell you that you need to tread lightly. Ambushes are my brother’s specialty. If your army has a weakness that can be exploited, he’ll see through it and hit you right where it hurts most when you least expect it. Rush into a battle with him, and you’ll regret it.”

“Hmm... I must admit, you would know Thomas better than any of us,” said Couran. “However, I cannot dismiss the possibility that you’ve chosen to advocate for a passive strategy out of a desire to not see your own brother slain.”

“You’re kidding, right? My brother’s one of the enemy’s key advisors! Do you realize how far up in the world I’d move if I offed him? Why would I *not* want him dead? If he were here, I’d chop his head off myself.”

“You have very little regard for your own family, it would seem,” said Couran with a frown.

“I’m surprised you’d criticize me for that, considering you’re trying to kill your brother for the title of duke.”

Couran fell silent. That, it seemed, was a point he couldn’t argue against. Unfortunately, it was also not a point he’d be pleased with, and Mireille *was* my subordinate. If I didn’t chastise her, I knew it would reflect poorly on me.

“That’s enough, Mireille,” I said. “You’ve spoken out of turn.”

“Hm? Oh, right. My bad.”

I wasn’t convinced she understood what was wrong with what she’d said, but I was grateful that she apologized anyway.

“For the record, I’m not saying this ’cause he’s my brother—I’m saying it ’cause keeping that in mind will increase our odds of victory.”

“Yes, I understand very well now that compassion does not motivate your actions,” said Couran. “Nevertheless, if we do not seize the initiative here, I cannot see how we’ll ever hope to topple Castle Staatz.”

“I’m not saying we have to slow our advance to a crawl or anything,” replied Mireille. “I just mean that moving faster than we already are would open us up

to attacks. You can see how that would be a problem, yeah?”

“So you propose that we advance at the same rate as before?” asked Couran.

“Right. I think our current pace strikes just the right balance between speed and caution.”

“And if we progress at the same rate, will we be able to claim Castle Staatz?”

“Good question. They’ll be bolstering their defenses, so we should start working out a plan for taking down a fully fortified castle, just in case.”

“What would such a plan entail? Sending in spies as we did for Castle Samkh?”

“That’d be a tough trick to pull off twice. Our enemies aren’t stupid, and when they learn how quickly the castle fell, it won’t be hard for them to figure out that spies were to blame. Their guards will be wary of that sort of trick, and no matter how skilled your spies are, it’d be hard to pull off a job when your target’s ready for you.”

I wouldn’t be convinced of that until I’d asked Pham for his perspective, but I had to admit that infiltrating a fort that was alerted to your presence *did* sound much harder than infiltrating a fort that was unaware of the danger you posed. All of that, however, left a question burning in my mind.

“But wait, Mireille,” I said. “In that case, how should we take down the castle?”

“We’ve got plenty of options. We could find a way to blackmail one of their commanders or leak false info to throw their defenses into chaos. We could lure the defenders out of the castle and into a trap or declare a ceasefire, then ambush them the second they lower their guard. We could take this in all sorts of directions, but I can’t say which would be the most effective yet. First things

first, we need more info. Those spies of yours might not be able to bring the whole castle down again, but they can do that much for us, can't they? And hey, even if they can't make it into the castle to get the juiciest info, tidbits gleaned from the surrounding area could make all the difference."

I was convinced by her logic. It wasn't like we'd be able to clean up the resistance in the County of Samkh and proceed directly to Castle Staatz—there were smaller forts on the border that we'd have to deal with, so we'd have plenty of time to gather information. Couran seemed to agree, as he declared that he would refrain from moving forward with excessive haste. We'd gather information on Castle Staatz, then iron out a concrete plan once we had a clear picture of what we were dealing with.

Our invasion of Velshdt would begin soon. If we emerged victorious, it would increase Couran's odds of defeating Vasmarque and claiming his place as the Duke of Missian.

My ultimate goal was to make the land I lived in as prosperous and peaceful as possible. If Couran defeated Vasmarque and granted me the position of Count of Canarre, as promised, I'd have taken a major step toward the fulfillment of that objective. War was far from my area of expertise, but I was resolved to do everything in my power to help lead us to victory.

Afterword

Thank you for purchasing volume two of *As a Reincarnated Aristocrat, I'll Use My Appraisal Skill to Rise in the World*! This is the author, Miraijin A, speaking.

This volume is scheduled for publication right around the end of the year. 2020 has been quite difficult in all sorts of ways on a global scale, but on a personal level, I've managed to publish multiple books and have had my stories used as the basis for comic adaptations. It's been a good year for me, all things considered. I have nothing but gratitude for the good people at Kodansha for publishing this book despite these turbulent times, and I'm truly grateful beyond words for my readers who bought the novel.

The first volume of *Reincarnated Aristocrat* focused primarily on the main character's quest to assemble a team of talented followers, but this second volume is centered around the conflict between a pair of brothers who each seek to rule over Missian. How did that new plot structure feel to you? I certainly hope you found it entertaining.

I've always loved historical stories that engage with battles and political maneuvering alike. I've read all sorts of comics and novels based on Japan's Warring States Period and the *Records of the Three Kingdoms*, and I love watching historical dramas set in those eras. Needless to say, I've played my fair share of video games based on the subject as well! This volume was extra fun for me to write due to all that knowledge—though with the fun came a newfound understanding of just how difficult stories like this are to tell. Depicting battles and politics requires an incredible degree of knowledge and descriptive ability, and writing a story involving those things was no easy task. I felt a clear and pressing need to improve my skills as I wrote.

Several new characters were introduced to the cast this volume. Stories that center around medieval conflicts like this one tend to have a ton of characters, and I know it might be hard for my readers to remember all of them, but trust me: it gets confusing for us authors sometimes, too! Personally speaking, I find that the more retainers there are in a story like this the more interesting it becomes, so I'm planning to add tons of characters as the story progresses.

I intend to bring the story of the war in Missian to a conclusion of sorts in the next volume. This installment was full of battles that our heroes won surprisingly easily, but you can expect them to have a harder time in the next one! That means I'll have plenty of opportunities to push Rietz, Charlotte, and the others into the spotlight. And, as I implied a moment ago, we'll be seeing some new characters as well! I'll do my best to write a book that my readers will enjoy, so I hope I see you again when volume three is published!

Author

Miraijin A

This is Kumamoto resident and full-time author Miraijin A speaking! The spread of the coronavirus has turned 2020 into a real mess, but personally speaking, I got a ton of books published, had some of my stories turned into manga, and my favorite baseball team, the Fukuoka SoftBank Hawks, won the Japan Series! It was a pretty good year for me, all around, and I hope that the virus will settle down and that next year will be even better!

Illust.

jimmy

I'm the illustrator, jimmy! I'm pretty much nocturnal—I just can't shake the habit. I hope you like the book!

As a Reincarnated Aristocrat, I'll Use My Appraisal Skill to Rise in the World 2

KODANSHA COMICS Digital Edition

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